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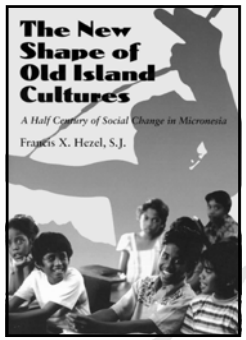
The New Shape of Old Island Cultures

The new book by Francis X. Hezel, SJ



The Years since World War II have brought unprecedented social change to Micronesia. Now, drawing on more than four decades of experience living and working in the region, Francis X. Hezel assesses the most striking changes to have swept over the islands in the past fifty years. The broad range of topics covered includes family structure, land, gender roles, cultural treatment of life events (birth, death and marriage), sexuality, political authority, demography and migration.

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HOW TOUGH WAS YOUR DAD?

By Francis X. Hezel, SJ

Mine Had Claws

One night, a few days before Christmas, as we sat around sipping wine under the lights of the newly decorated church bell tower in Kolonia, the subject suddenly turned to suicide. This often seems to happen, even on such festive occasions, when I'm in the group. Someone–it may have even been myself–asked each of us to tell about the time when he or she had thought of suicide. Almost every one of the fifteen or so adults in our circle had considered it, even if ever so briefly, at one time or another. There we were, adults in our middle-age or beyond, church and community leaders, owning up that we were distressed or angry enough one or twice to entertain thoughts of self-destruction.

I told the group that at the age of twelve or thirteen I once stormed out of the house infuriated at something my father had said to me. I can't remember just what he said, but I have a clear recollection of the overpowering rage that gripped me and my determination at that moment that I would never return home. Finding a loaded gun or even knotting a rope and selecting a good tree to jump from were beyond me. Suicide was a rarity in those days in Buffalo. We all had learned that suicide was a terrible sin and that those who took their own lives could not be buried in a Catholic cemetery. The only suicide that I recall in our community was a man suffering from terminal cancer who put a shotgun to his head and pulled the trigger with his toe. Everyone talked about this with obvious horror and disgust for weeks afterward.

I wouldn't have gone quite so far as to shoot or hang myself. But if I could have commanded the earth to open and swallow me forever, I can tell you that I would have done so. I might have even gone so far as to step out into the street in front of a car, but instead I walked off the anger. It took about an hour to calm down, as I remember. By that time, gentler and kinder thoughts began slipping in: my father distributing presents on Christmas, hitting fly balls to me and my brothers on the university campus not far from our home, bringing us to the beach on summer days.

How tough was *your* dad? Mine was a bear. He was fond of remarking, after any one of my innumerable gaffes: "The older they are, the dumber they get" (I was the oldest of his five boys). He wasn't above removing his belt and laying it strongly on my behind or dunking my head in water when I was especially naughty. But for all that, I never had any doubt that he loved me. That's what saved me, I suppose, when I stormed out of the house in fury.

TEN RULES OF PARENTING

1. Children today are well aware that love is more than simply material support. They expect other signs of affection, especially time and interest from their parents.

2. Children learn from what parents do, not just what they say. In a day when parents have become the main educators, it is all the more important that they model the behavior they expect to see in their children.

3. Young people need to know not just what's right and what's wrong, but why this is so. Without explanations, they will find it very hard to develop an internal compass to guide them as adults.

4. Parents should spend time in activities with their children. This is especially important for fathers as their relationship with their sons becomes more authority-driven.

5. Young people need to be steered by their parents, not just left to absorb what they pick up from their peers. This is all the more important today, when the the tight-knit fabric of the family and community no longer protects them as it once did.

6. Young people should have regular contact with their extended family, since these relatives can still contribute valuable services to the family. These services are an important supplement to the father-son relationship.

7. Punishment still plays a key role in training children, but the punishment should be appropriate, consistent, and aimed at helping the young person.

8. Young people should have opportunities to participate with their parents in everyday family life. This builds a sense of belonging and affection for others in the family. Boys as well as girls should be given household duties so that they feel they are contributing to the group.

9. Divorce or even temporary breakups between parents can be much more traumatic today than formerly, because children no longer have as secure a nest in the larger family. If this does happen, compensatory steps will have to be taken.

10. Children need to see real love between their parents and feel the love of their parents for them. If this is done, no matter what else happens, the young person will probably end up well.

that the son have enough experience of positive support to see him through the disappointment of these occasional refusals.

Getting Help Where We Can

The break up of the extended family is clearly putting great demands on mothers and fathers today. They're expected to do so much more for their children than they did some years ago. Even the once simple expedient of adopting out their children to other relatives does not seem to be as common today as previously, perhaps because children are seen as more of a burden than a welcome resource. Does this mean that parents must resign themselves to going it alone?

The changes in the form and function of the family that we have experienced in the last few decades are probably irreversible. No matter how strongly we feel about the old cultural ways, we can't roll back the calendar. However, we can mobilize the resources that are left to us and we can make better use of them to help us raise stronger and happier families.

In the US and other countries with a long history of nuclear families there is a noticeable swing back toward the larger family. For Americans this doesn't mean packing the house with aunts and uncles day in and day out. It means keeping an active lookout for opportunities to gather the clan and enjoy one another's company–perhaps at special parties on holidays, perhaps by spending vacation time together, perhaps by extended visits with relatives who live at a distance. "Why wait until the next kid gets married to get the big family group together?" they seem to be saying. "We can invent ways of our own to bring together the larger family unit."

In many parts of Micronesia today the same thing seems to be happening. This is a fruitful direction for the future, for children need access to other members of their extended family who once would have played a major role in helping them make the transition to adulthood. Uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents–those persons with vital roles in the past–can still be key figures in resolving tensions and providing reassurance and guidance for the young.

New Commandments for Parenting

Parents will have to adapt their practices if they hope to be successful with the new generations today and tomorrow. Dads can be tough if they wish, but they must also bear in mind these guidelines for parenting.

Those Who Didn't Survive

There are over a thousand people I know of who could never have sat around telling the stories we did that December evening because they are dead. These people–1033, to be exact, all of them Micronesians–succumbed to the impulses that we resisted. They did what we only imagined: they walked out of the house never to return. They took their own lives, taking as they did something of the lives of those who were closest to them. They are the suicide victims in Micronesia during the forty years between 1960 and 2000.

Perhaps their dads (or moms) were much tougher than mine. Is it that Micronesian parents are so much tougher than American parents? Or did Micronesian fathers just get tougher as the years went on? Only 41 of these suicide victims ended their lives during the 1960s, while five times as many (221) committed suicide during the 1970s. Throughout the 1980s, there were 354 suicides, while the number rose to 417 in the next decade. By the end of this period we were witnessing 45 or 50 suicides a year throughout FSM, Palau, and the Marshall Islands.

Even if we allow for the rapidly increasing population during these years, the growth of the suicide problem is still stunning. After correcting for population change between the 1960s and 1990s, the suicide rate is six times as high now as it was then. Have the dads become that much tougher today? Or are there other forces at work to escalate the risk of suicide? What are kids today missing that we of an older generation had? How is it that the old-timers were able to escape suicide much more easily than youth today?

Just How Tough Were Dads Back Then?

How tough were fathers forty or fifty years ago? Many of us imagine the men of that generation to be towers of strength, unyielding in their judgments and harsh disciplinarians toward their sons. Yet, perhaps this generation of dads were not as tough as we would like to think. Leonard Mason, a respected anthropologist who worked in the Marshalls, told me once that Marshallese thought of their father as an outrigger, a support and balance to steady the family, but certainly not the load-carrying hull of the canoe. There is reason to think that what he describes for the Marshalls was true of most other parts of Micronesia.

Fathers certainly did not enjoy absolute authority over their sons. The authority was shared with many others in the extended family, especially the

relatives of his wife. The son would have looked to his mother's brothers–a position important enough to merit a special term nearly everywhere in Micronesia–for support and advice and even material assistance. To hear older people talk, the matrilineage played a very important role in providing care for its younger members. Perhaps it could have been called the hull of the canoe. When I first began teaching at Xavier forty years ago, my students from Palau and Pohnpei would boast that, if their request for something were turned down by their father, they would go to their maternal uncle for help. There were other sources of support as well in an age when members of the extended family were living down the path, right next door, or perhaps even in the same house. A young man could count on grandparents, a variety of aunts and uncles, and sometimes even older cousins to provide the support and direction he might not be able to get from his father.

Even the community got into the act in those days, for there were a hundred pairs of watchful eyes, not all of them belonging to his close relatives, trained on the youth. If the young man stumbled, hands would reach out to catch him. If he wandered off the path, many voices would call him back. Although the special responsibility of close kin to supervise children was acknowledged, many others collaborated to bring up children and maintain surveillance on youth.

Since the father usually had plenty of help in guiding and disciplining his sons, there was no need for him to be especially tough on them. But even if he was, there were many others, including his wife's male relatives, who could offset his severity. These individuals could explain, console and mediate when a problem arose between a boy and his father. Any boy who left his house angry would almost inevitably be noticed by another male relative who was in a position to help him.

New Conditions, New Responses

Today the father has come to dominate his immediate family as he never could have in the past. There were simply too many others on the playing field–his own father who may have ruled the estate, or his wife's brothers who would have taken a strong interest in his children–for that to happen. Nowadays the father not only exercises supreme authority over his sons, but he too often feels that he must do so in what he considers a "traditional" manner–that is to say, in a strong and silent fashion as if his word were law. Accordingly, he may think it is beneath his dignity to explain to his son the why and wherefore of the commands he is issuing. While he conducts himself in a way that he believes to be rooted in the

While the purpose of punishment is to correct bad behavior, positive reinforcement can be used to reward good behavior. Island fathers are not usually inclined to praise their sons, I've observed over the years. When, at a youth conference, we asked how parents expressed their satisfaction with what their son had done, a Yapese told us that when he was growing up lack of criticism from his father was taken as approval. Island fathers don't have to throw their arms around their sons or become demonstrative, but they should consider whether they might need to show more positive approbation of their sons at times.

The Expression of Love

Love is so basic to good parenting, yet so easily misunderstood. The ambiguity of the ways in which love can be expressed has caused no end of problems in Micronesia. In the past, providing food and material support was a mark of nurturing and a sign of love. It would not have made sense for a boy to ask whether his parents loved him as long as they fed him and provided for his other material needs. In an age in which public affective displays were thought to be in bad taste, the proof of love was in their obvious support for him.

The problem is, of course, that this equation cuts the other way as well. Denial of material support by the parents can be mistaken for a sign of withdrawal of love. So when a teenage son staggers into the house drunk to ask his father for another twenty dollars so that he can treat his friends to another case of beer, his refusal may be regarded as a denial of love. Even though the father deems it irresponsible to honor such a request, he might do so anyway because of his fear of the consequences of refusing his son. The father, then, finds himself between the pillar and the post. How can he turn down his son's request without conveying the unintended message that he does not love his son?

There's no simple answer to this question in a day when store shelves are stocked with luxuries, when parents have to balance basic family needs with a limited income, and when fathers have to steer their teenage sons away from the temptations of youth. It's hard to be a parent in any age, especially in this one, without having to say no at times. As fraught with dangers as it might be, "tough love" is more important today than ever before.

Tough love is more easily accepted when young men have had to accustom themselves to it from early childhood. A pampered child might have trouble adjusting to a sudden strict regime during his teenage years. If parents feel obliged to deny their sons, a word of explanation would go a long way in helping the son feel better about the refusal. But the most important factor, as always, is

How to Punish

Punishing children when they misbehave is an important part of raising kids, but for many Micronesian parents it is seen as risky business. Lurking in the back of their minds is the fear that punishing their son might drive him to take his own life. The suicide accounts would seem to confirm this fear, for they tell of one young man after another who, just before his death, was scolded or denied something by his parents. All this can dissuade a father from even trying to discipline his son. As a former child myself (often at the business end of my dad's belt) and a long-time high school teacher, I have always believed that it is a mistake to try to avoid all punishment.

Punishment is a clear and forceful way of punctuating a No. It is a necessary part of the guidance that parents are expected to provide for their children to steer them away from what will hurt them in some way or another. If parents set limits for their kids at an early age, the children will become accustomed to living within these boundaries. The limits will have to be modified as the son grows older, of course. Nevertheless, life without boundaries, either as a child or an adult, is unthinkable.

Punishment should not be meted out to maintain the family's image in the community or to satisfy an angry parent; it's to help develop the character of the young man at the receiving end. I'm not sure that I entirely believed my father when he told me, as he was loosening his belt, that this was going to hurt him more than me, but I did believe, sometimes reluctantly, that he was doing it for my own good.

If punishment is going to help sons grow, then there are three conditions that fathers (and mothers) must observe. First, the son deserves an explanation of what he has done wrong and why he is being punished if he is going to learn from it. The macho reply "Because I am the law and what I say goes" does nothing at all to help develop character. Second, consistency in administering punishment is essential. How is a son to learn rational patterns of behavior that will guide his life in the future if he is punished only on days that his father has had five or more Budweisers? When this happens, the son learns that the norm for punishment is the mood of his father, not how good or bad his own behavior has been. Finally, parents should mete out punishment in an aura of love. Whatever they may be required to do to their sons from time to time, there should be no way for their sons to miss the point that their mom and dad love them.

past, the father can easily forget that the authority he wields so strongly today was once distributed among many older people in the family.

In the meantime, the shape of the Micronesian family has been changing. How many extended families still live together, work together, and eat from the same pot? Sure, the extended family still gathers from time to time to celebrate special events, but usually not on a daily basis. Our age has seen the multiplication of small living units just big enough for mom, dad and the kids. Even where larger families live on the same property, new boundaries have been drawn between nuclear families. Grandparents and other adult relatives can cuddle the kids, but they must respect the father's full authority over his children.

Most of the parenting burden today is borne by the mother and father alone. Parents don't have the resources to assist them that they once enjoyed, although they sometimes act as though they did. Fathers could get away with heavy involvement in business or government–with the frequent trips off island, the long hours in the office each day, and the after-work drinking sessions in the evening–if there were others to pick up the slack. Their absence from home would be easier on their children if there were several "fill-in fathers"–uncles or older cousins or grandparents–to instruct and guide and discipline. But the sad fact is that there aren't in many families today. Who, then, will be taking the kids out to the field to hit fly balls to them? Or bringing them along on fishing trips? How is the bonding between father and son that has always been so important to take place? How are the sons to reap those fond memories of time spent with dad that will see them through the moments of anger and bitterness that are bound to come?

As the social landscape in Micronesia is changing, so is the form of the family. Yet, many fathers act as though everything were just the same as it was thirty or forty or fifty years ago. The unintended consequences of their refusal to recognize the obvious can be tragic: not just suicide, but alienation from their sons that takes other forms as well.

New social conditions demand new responses. It was for this reason that, two years ago, Micronesian Seminar conducted a series of parenting workshops in the area. At these workshops participants had the opportunity to examine the changed circumstances of life today and discuss how all this might require adjustment in the way parents bring up their children. Drawing heavily on this discussion, we offer for consideration these new rules for parenting.

Closing the Time Gap

Modernization in today's world has opened a yawning gap between fathers and sons. Many fathers don't see their sons from morning until evening, and even then they might often miss one another as they follow their separate schedules. Fathers work away from home all day, while their evenings tend to be occupied with meetings, community obligations and socializing. Meanwhile, their sons are off in school or working during the day and often hanging out with their friends in the evening. Fathers and sons inhabit different social worlds, worlds that seldom seem to intersect.

Compare this with the past, when fathers and sons spent great parts of the day side by side, working on the land, fishing, and doing all the other chores that rural life demanded of men. Sons had abundant opportunity to watch their fathers at work and to learn from them–not just how to cut ridge poles for a house or bait a fishline, but how to adjust to the quirks of their father's personality.

How can fathers hope to be effective teachers and guides for their sons unless they have a good feel for their sons' interests and ambitions and strengths and needs? But this requires that fathers find time to spend with their sons, whether time on a boat with lines thrown into the water or on a family picnic. It also requires that the communication be two-way, that the father listen as well as speak. Shared activity and time together is a necessary condition for building open, trusting and loving relationships. If this sounds a little too Western, bear in mind that traditional island families had their own ways of doing the same thing. Sons have always needed time, attention and affection in order to grow up into emotionally stable and productive adults, but there was a larger family circle to satisfy these needs back then.

Fathers might be tempted to leave to their wives the chore of parenting their teenage sons, but this would be a serious mistake. Some traditional rules of life remain in effect, even in a rapidly modernizing society, including the one dictating that males should take a strong hand in raising their post-adolescent boys, just as mothers do with their daughters. Fathers will simply have to make time for their sons if they hope to raise a healthy and happy family. The summer picnics and car rides that I enjoyed as a boy showed me as nothing else could that my father loved me. That didn't stop me from becoming furious at him at times, but it did prevent me from acting rashly when those emotional crises occurred.

The Case for Freedom

Fathers who claim to be following the old rules of parenting may be suspicious of the term "freedom" as an alien concept, something that had little place in childrearing in the old days. They have a point. In the past children were raised to conform, as one of the participants of our parenting workshop put it. But today children have to be formed, he added. By this he meant that the young must enjoy some freedom, for without it they can not be prepared to make their own decisions later on.

In the past, when "teenage" continued well beyond the age of twenty, sometimes into the late thirties or beyond, young men had plenty of help from their family in making critical life decisions. Before they married, they were expected to get formal approval from their own family as well as that of the girl. Young men had little voice in any important decisions to be made regarding the land on which they lived and how it was to be used. What should they contribute to a community or church function? There were many people on hand to offer them strong advice. As long as they stayed in their own community, they could count on constant help as they navigated their way through the first half of their lives.

Nowadays, however, they are expected to sail through uncharted waters alone. They face a multitude of important life decisions–the college they should attend, the career they should adopt, the kind and cost of house they should buy, the woman they should marry, even whether they should live overseas. They must be prepared to make a solo voyage, often at an age when young men in the past were still in the tight embrace of their community. Freedom is the condition that allows them to practice making smaller decisions so that they'll be prepared when they have to face the real hard choices of life. They need room to try out their sailing canoe not too far from shore before they head for the open sea.

Freedom does not mean turning young men loose and leaving them entirely on their own. On every island in Micronesia can be found a few of those sorry souls who wander as they please doing whatever they wish whenever they wish. They are at least as bad off as the young people who are kept under lock and key by parents fearful of them making mistakes. If freedom is not to turn into permissiveness, it must be accompanied by constant vigilance and guidance on the part of the parents. This is asking a lot from busy fathers, but no one ever said that it would be easy to raise a son in this present day and age.