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Education and Cultural Change: A view from Micronesia

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Education and Cultural Change: A view from Micronesia

Abstract

Traditionally, transmission of cultural knowledge between generations in Micronesia was the role of family, in particular parents and grandparents. To what extent is that role still important today? In this article, we draw on data obtained from questionnaires distributed to high school and primary school children throughout Micronesia in 2002 and 2003 to consider how culture is being transferred between generations today. We argue the importance of local communities being closely involved in all aspects of formal education including developing and managing schools and their curricula to ensure that local aspirations are satisfied. Micronesian children have expressed preferences for favourite food, drink, and entertainment that follow international trends closely and are moving away from traditional choices. The data also show a shift away from traditional family-based cultural education to a more formal school-based model that emphasises the importance of teachers being familiar and sympathetic with local culture.

Keywords
Cultural heritage, culture transfer, education, local community.
Introduction

The commonly used label “Micronesia” is not truly adequate to describe the immense cultural and social variety within the region it represents. Hanlon (1999, p.76) forcefully argues that Micronesia is “a colonial construct located, bounded, defined and described by a series of different colonial regimes whose efforts were self-serving and exploitative”. Clark (2003, p.155) notes that “Island geography and selected physical and cultural attributes of the resident populations were allied to construct powerful identities of difference that continue to affect the way Oceania and its peoples are viewed today”. It is doubtful that such “identities of difference” ever existed except as a European invention and Clark (2003, p.158) questions whether the continued use of such terminology inhibits further conceptual advances in Pacific studies.

In 1832, the French navigator and explorer, Jules-Sébastien-César Dumont d’Urville, presented a paper to the Société de Géographie in which he determined upon a division of the Pacific into four regions using the terms Malaysia, Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. These labels were not d’Urville’s personal inventions, but synthesised European anthropologic thinking in the early nineteenth century. They have been described by Tcherkézoff (2003, p.175) as an “invention bordering on imposture” and shows d’Urville’s “terminology simply added a few proper nouns to a theory [that was] in existence two and a half centuries before 1832”. Tcherkézoff (2003, p. 176) further asserts that d’Urville “made no secret” of his desire to “contribute to racial theories of human variation” then current in Europe and considers the label to have strong racist overtones.

D’Arcy (2003) shows that by 1980 dissatisfaction with d’Urville’s racially based division of Pacific Islanders was mounting amongst scholars of various disciplines. Rainbird (2003) states d’Urville had little knowledge of those islands falling within his proposed boundaries of Micronesia. In fact, Rainbird (2003, p. 107) states categorically that these islands “were poorly known to him [d’Urville] personally and intellectually” and that this lack of knowledge led to misguided generalisations. Thomas (1989) has even suggested that any scholar using these terms today must also share their original racist assumptions.
Despite these observations, no truly viable alternative has yet emerged. For the purposes of this paper, the term Micronesia is used to represent five political entities in the northern Pacific and excludes others that d’Urville included, such as Nauru and Kiribati. It comprises the Republic of Palau (ROP), Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). Excepting Guam, these entities were once part of the American Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI). The CNMI, FSM, RMI and ROP are independent states that are closely associated with the United States of America, while Guam, the largest island of the Marianas group, is an unincorporated territory of the United States.

Methodology and Definitions

Base data used in this paper was extracted from questionnaires distributed to students undergoing formal education at private and public Elementary and High Schools in Micronesia during 2002 and 2003. Other data was obtained from interviews with professional Micronesian and non-Micronesian historic preservationists and non-professional Micronesians between 1999 and 2003 (O’Neill, 2005; O’Neill & Spennemann, 2006). Permission to distribute the questionnaires to school attendees was granted by Government departments and individual School Principals. No student was approached without this permission and without the company of their teachers. The research was conducted under the auspices of Charles Sturt University, Australia, and in accordance with formal approval granted by that University’s Ethics Committee. The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of Micronesian schools or Government Departments.

Definitions simplify ideas or realities that are too complex for easy use, and inequitable power relationships can contribute to their development and application by denying meanings originating with less powerful societies. Consequently, they can be problematic and ambiguous, particularly when aspects of human social life (where experience, context and many other variables have such strong effect) are involved. Nevertheless, as Hall et al (2004) have noted, that some things may be difficult to define does not mean they do not exist or are without worth or importance.

The word culture is an example, one that has changed quite significantly over time. In a sociological sense, it refers to the interconnecting structures built by communities
and which support their portraits of self. It has several properties as Bodley (2005) has shown: – it is shared by individuals within communities, it is symbolic, it is learned, it is transmitted across generations, it is adaptive, and it is integrated. As a complex, multi-dimensional, adaptive construct, it is constantly revised through dynamic processes of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction. When a community perceives elements of its culture as being valuable those elements are maintained and transmitted to following generations using various methods. From the point of view of this paper, that culture is learned and not inherited is a key aspect that may be seen in a community as a common, shared, and negotiated set of learned behaviours. If learning culture is important, then it is manifest that teaching culture is also crucial, not only in terms of what is taught, but also in how and by whom.

Heritage is closely related but is an almost amorphous term. It may be that what heritage is preserved is not so much determined by a society’s definition of heritage as it is the reverse – what constitutes heritage is defined by what a society chooses to preserve. This paper uses the term generically and applies it to all cultural or historical elements a community associates with its cultural self-image. It is composed of both tangible and non-tangible elements of heritage property and thus reflects a clearly recognised and acknowledged sense of ownership that is essential and without which there can be neither property nor heritage. In close partnership with this sense of ownership is an associated sense of belonging that completes the circle of linkage between heritage, culture, and the individual.

Informal systems of education such as those provided by immediate and extended family, peer groups, and communities are historically closely associated with traditional social structures. In Micronesia, the emphasis that was once placed upon these appears to be waning, and formal systems of collective learning such as schools have become “major cultural institutions everywhere… [and] …organize the way that children learn aspects of their cultural heritage” as Lindstrom and White (1997 p.11) explain. Although these expressions originate in the immediate context of Melanesia, they are also most apt in relation to schools and official education systems in Micronesia. In terms of Indigenous culture generally, this particular feature of formal education is becoming increasingly important in cultural transference between generations.
This research does not deconstruct school curricula, nevertheless it would seem to be self-evident that local communities should be more involved than they are in developing and managing schools and their curricula to ensure that local aspirations are satisfied. Barrs (2005) investigated the impact of local governance on community schools in Pakistan and shows it can enhance the education process. Spennemann and Meyenn (2005) commented on the compartmentalisation of formal education and the relegation if not marginalisation of cultural education in Melanesia. They concluded that cultural education was a desirable inclusion in mainstream curricula and that education in primary schools should occur in the local vernacular with English/French ideally taught as a second language. Local cultural context should pervade all aspects of school curricula and tendencies to delegate cultural education to “culture week” in some form or other should be strenuously resisted.

In a study of three Head Start programmes, Lubeck et al (2001) illustrate how cultures take shape “in different ways through dynamic interactions in particular contexts” and conclude that in educational programmes it is important to balance the general with the local. Kanu (2005) discusses ways in which aspects of local culture (in the form of concepts of self, discursive practices and Indigenous approaches to learning) have a critical application in developing curricula that are effective in local circumstances and satisfy local conditions. An appreciation of local aspirations and educational and cultural preferences must be evident in education programmes for them to truly be effective. In this context at least, the call by Fuller and Clarke (1994 p. 121) for models of school/programme effectiveness to be “culturally–situated” cannot lightly be dismissed.

A report prepared by the Pacific Regional Advisory Committee for the U.S. Department of Education recognised culture and Indigenous languages as important issues requiring specific action (PRAC 2005). Such recognition adds strength to the suggestion that local communities should be more involved in the development and perhaps even delivery of formal education systems. Local involvement would help to ensure that those elements of culture considered important by communities are included in learning programmes and taught in a culturally appropriate manner.

Establishing formal national systems of education that are equitable, of good quality and socially relevant requires national vision. They also demand considerable resources, including monetary; physical (such as land and buildings); curricula;
teaching tools such as textbooks; adequate computers and communication facilities; and, most importantly, teachers who are well trained, highly motivated and culturally aware. All of these are expensive, and in the 21st Century, many emergent countries simply do not have the capacity to generate the significant funds required to achieve this from internal sources. They are also frequently in situations where development of such extensive centralised operations is not possible in the short time scale required due to a lack of domestic infrastructure. Smith (2005) shows that building the capacity to provide a superior education service is likely to be more critical in achieving sustainable reform than any other factor.

Where political entities comprise many small islands scattered across large expanses of ocean (such as is the case in most of Micronesia), further challenges must be faced. For one, land is a very limited resource. Traditional methods of land ownership can also make it difficult for Governments to acquire sufficient suitable land for constructing centres of education. Secondly, the scattered nature of settlement, with small communities separated by very large expanses of ocean poses problems in delivery of educational services. While smaller communities can usually sustain a primary school, secondary education is limited to larger centres. As transportation is generally unreliable and frequently expensive, students from smaller communities have to live away from home thus removing them from their strongest connections to culture and heritage – immediate family. Depending on the cultural diversity and integrity of the island nations, this provides both opportunity and threat of cultural change. Finally, the scattered nature of settlement also makes it difficult to attract (or retain) skilled teachers. While primary school teachers can sometimes be drawn from the local community this is not always the case, and attracting secondary teachers is usually even more difficult.

Acquiring land, constructing schools, providing a sufficiency of adequately trained teachers and administrators, developing appropriate curricula, and providing schools with adequate resources, demand a large share of scarce national resources. In such circumstances, what options are available? One that is popular is to seek international donor aid. This option is more frequently being treated with circumspection because in the past such aid has often been tied to unrealistic and culturally insensitive demands by donors. While donors may consider their imposed demands reasonable
and appropriate, recipients often perceive them to be almost a form of social blackmail. The following examples serve to illustrate (emphasis added).

Leurs (2002) reported on donor practices in Senegal and cited several respondents who claimed that, “less than 10% of committed aid is actually used in Senegal”. He also showed several recipients perceived aid to be “tied to various conditions that were too numerous, too burdensome, [and] too rigidly imposed or otherwise inappropriate”. ActionAid (nd) discusses the issue of donor-imposed conditionality and state their belief “that solutions have to be home-grown, and home-owned. Donors need to step back from intrusive policy conditions, and allow poor countries to reach policy decisions in a balanced and transparent way.” Johnston and Manning (2005) show that the 60,000 plus aid projects in the “developing world” place heavy burdens on poor countries that lack the administrative capacity to handle donor demands. They further state that the “solution is not to reduce aid, but to link it better to local priorities, help countries build competent systems over time”.

Clearly, such donor driven priorities and donor-imposed conditions have great potential to effect intended and unintended cultural change. While development workers from external societies are acknowledged as agents of cultural change (Coverdell 1998), this should not be the case in cultural education where any change should be initiated locally. Let us now look at the situation more particularly as it stands in Micronesia today.

**Micronesia**

Micronesian education systems are closely based on that of the United States and in most instances are very dependent on U.S. donor funding. The RMI, FSM and ROP separately negotiated formal agreements or compacts with the U.S. under which they are assured of receiving a level of funding. Nevertheless, funding specifically for their education sectors is limited, insecure, and has a history of being hedged with conditions that hinder the ability of local education systems to manage the programmes effectively.

Although Micronesia is very dependent on U.S. assistance in education, UNESCO has reported that the U.S. places the lowest priority on education of all Development Assistance Committee (DAC) countries. This report (Development Assistance Committee 2005) details the education aid provided by DAC countries in 2001/2002
and shows the total amount of aid committed to education as a percentage of total aid. It compares the U.S. provision of 7.6% unfavourably with Japan 22.5%, France 20.9%, and Germany 15.6%, and shows that only 3.6% of U.S. bilateral aid commitments were for education. This disparity is further illustrated by the ratio between the proportion of total aid assigned to education by each agency and the mean for all agencies, which is described as the relative priority (Development Assistance Committee 2005). This statistic shows the small Pacific nation of New Zealand assigns the greatest priority to education of all 22 DAC countries (3.5) while the U.S. has the lowest (0.4).

Largely because of the continued dependence of Micronesia on the United States, coupled with the accreditation of Micronesian school systems by U.S. educational organisations, Micronesian curricula are heavily U.S.-oriented. Material based on U.S. educational needs is frequently included at the expense of material that is more culturally, geographically, and nationally relevant. Chutaro and Heine (2003 p.31) show that conditions imposed by the U.S. as the principal aid donor result in Marshallese children being taught irrelevant U.S. history while Marshallese history is ignored. They also show that there is a pronounced emphasis on teaching English rather than Marshallese, as well as upon teaching in English. In contradistinction, Trudell (2005) argues that teaching in Indigenous languages can be vital in improving the effectiveness of educational programmes. English is a core subject from an early stage in all Micronesian education programmes, but it must be acknowledged, as Kirkpatrick (2002) notes, that in many instances it is neither the first nor the preferred language. Spennemann and Meyenn (2005) make similar observations of Melanesia.

U.S. school curricula have been devised in a very different cultural setting and under very different circumstances but are often used unchanged in Micronesia. Chutaro and Heine (2003 p.17) show that “used and dated textbooks cast aside by wealthier school systems” being “given to schools in Micronesia”, the inculcation of “Western values and beliefs”, and the enforcement of English as the language of education and culture have resulted in schools becoming “foreign to the local people”.

The situation is similar in Palau and the CNMI, even though history and civics texts have been written specifically to satisfy local requirements. See for example Rechehei and McPhetres (1997) in the case of Palau, and Farrell (1991) and McPhetres (1997) in the case of the CNMI. Kanu (2005) shows that appropriate attention to local culture
in the development and delivery of curricula may help expatriate teachers provide effective and beneficial learning experiences for their students.

The issue of inappropriate teaching materials and curricula is exacerbated by a shortage of trained Indigenous teachers that the data do not properly explain and is beyond the scope of this paper. One way to overcome this is to attract overseas trained teachers, and several emerging political entities have opted to use this method, at least as a temporary measure until sufficient local teachers have been trained. However, it has potentially adverse effects, some financial, some social, and others in terms of introducing unwanted changes to local Indigenous culture.

For instance, de Bres (2005) discusses the sharp discrepancy in service conditions between expatriate and Indigenous teachers in Tonga and highlights a level of dissatisfaction within the community at the apparent variations in employment conditions. This can impose a considerable burden on emergent countries. It can hinder training of sufficient numbers of Indigenous teachers to satisfy the local demand, and it may become a cause of local dissent. As such, it can also result in expatriate teachers becoming more permanent than originally intended.

The U.S. Peace Corps debuted in 1961. By 2005, it had organised 182,000 volunteers, in 138 countries, had a budget of US$317 million, and, illustrating its commitment to education, 34% of its volunteers worked in the sector (Peace Corps nd). It is therefore no surprise that it has been closely linked to Americanisation of Micronesian education systems. In a briefing paper for Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL), Timarong et al (nd) state (emphasis added):

“In the 1960s, the Kennedy administration recognized the true value of Micronesia and gave millions of dollars in aid, especially for education. The government of the Trust Territory was then responsible for building, funding, and running the schools. Students were taught by American contract workers and Peace Corps volunteers. In 1964, the first public high school was built. Before this, the only secondary school had been a mission school. At this time, the schools were reorganized based on an American model, and villages were supplied with full-time teachers. It was also at this point that Western values began their integration into the Palauan culture.”

Many of these predominantly young and idealistic educators were recent graduates themselves, had little teaching experience and even less experience with different life-ways. The dynamic Micronesian cultures were unlike those of America, and in spite of official attempts to provide appropriate cultural and language training, some
volunteers found it difficult to the point of personal distress. At least one suicide has been linked to frustrations apparently generated by these considerable cultural differences (Peace Corps Online nd). Nevertheless, the impact of these foreign trained teachers on local culture was rapid and considerable. It was all so very natural. These young, enthusiastic volunteers represented a powerful external culture and introduced cultural change at various levels throughout Micronesian society.

This organisation has become an extremely effective agent of cultural change, consciously or unconsciously introducing aspects of American culture into other cultures and popularising American life-ways at the expense of traditional ones. This is clearly recognised by the U.S. Government, and was acknowledged when the then First Lady Barbara Bush lauded its success by stating that the “Peace Corps is the biggest bang for the buck in Washington, DC” (Coverdell 1998).

**Change in cultural education**

Micronesia is not only a collection of islands and atolls that are widely distributed geographically, it comprises many cultures that are varied and unique. As part of a recent, wider study into Micronesian heritage management practices (O’Neill 2005), elementary school students from several schools in Micronesia were polled in regard to their culture and the cultural values they hold as evidenced by life practices. In this survey, open questions regarding food, drink and entertainment (television, reading, dance, story telling, and games) provided respondents with opportunities to express their personal preferences, opinions and values about these elements of their daily lives. Their responses provide insights into the types and sources of cultural elements about which Micronesian children are learning or not learning, as the case may be. Preferences for food, drink and entertainment, and some associated changes in cultural practices appear to be developing quite rapidly in this generation.

The survey shows children’s favourite food, drink, games, music, and stories, are now tending to follow international trends with a consequent move away from traditional choices (O’Neill & Spennemann, 2006). The rapid growth in consumption of processed food and drink (most popular choices were pizza and soda), and of non-traditional entertainment such as television, electronic games, pop music and written stories (the Harry Potter series was a very popular choice), mirror developments in ‘western’ countries.
Respondents expressed strong preferences for ‘favourite’ items that have little or no traditional cultural connections and are international in scope (see Table 1). Their choices of ‘favourite’ entertainment, reading material, television, videos, music, dancing, food and drink, show an emerging internationalisation of their preferences.

Questions relating to television and children’s favourite shows and videos highlighted the popularity of the media and the extent to which local television broadcasting and video hire/purchase is almost totally dominated by an industry based outside of Micronesia. Consequently, cultural standards and practices that are non-traditional and even non-Micronesian in nature are highlighted in the entertainment media at the expense of traditional Micronesian cultures. It is not surprising therefore for respondents to this question to reflect cultural traits and choices that originate from alternative cultures portrayed through this powerful medium for change.

Table 1 Children's Preferences – Food, Drink & Games (percent) – from O’Neill (2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Foods</th>
<th>Drinks</th>
<th>Games</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trad</td>
<td>Non-Trad</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNMI</td>
<td>21.83</td>
<td>73.02</td>
<td>5.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guam</td>
<td>22.22</td>
<td>68.65</td>
<td>9.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROP</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>29.63</td>
<td>20.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSM</td>
<td>53.33</td>
<td>42.22</td>
<td>4.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMI</td>
<td>52.60</td>
<td>42.86</td>
<td>4.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the processes involved with the internationalisation of commerce impact on cultures throughout the world (Bauman 1998; Hoogvelt 1997), how they may best be managed by separate cultures so their impacts on cultures are minimised has not yet been determined. Consequently, both the processes themselves and their impacts are largely unmanaged whether local communities consider them appropriate or not.

We acknowledge that a considered and intentional acceptance of external influences is a hallmark of cultural change, and that adoption by societies of selected cultural elements demonstrates the emergence of a continuous cultural identity. We contend, however, that much of this occurs unwittingly and without much reflection. A perfect example of this are the responses with regard to favourite dances (Table 2).
Three hundred and ninety-six nominations were made for “favourite dance”. The major dance categories included under the heading “Non-traditional” are summarised in Table 3 and are compared with the number of “traditional” dances. They include the category of “western” such as the Cha Cha, Rap, and Rock & Roll (137), the Hawaiian Hula (59), and Tahitian dances (27). In Guam, Hawaiian dances were just as popular as traditional dances (both 20%) while in the FSM they were even more popular than traditional dances (28%). In the CNMI, Tahitian dances were very popular and accounted for 18% of nominations for favourite dance. Twenty-two percent of the “favourite dances” nominated by respondents across the region were for Hawaiian or Tahitian cultural dances (see Table 3). This is suggestive and may reflect the length of time European colonial forces held power and the extent of their influence over Micronesian countries.

### Table 3 Categories of dances selected by country (Percentage) – from O’Neill (2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Traditional</th>
<th>Western</th>
<th>Hawaiian</th>
<th>Tahitian</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CNMI</td>
<td>36.62</td>
<td>34.60</td>
<td>14.90</td>
<td>6.82</td>
<td>7.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guam</td>
<td>36.62</td>
<td>34.60</td>
<td>14.90</td>
<td>6.82</td>
<td>7.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROP</td>
<td>36.62</td>
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<td>6.82</td>
<td>7.06</td>
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<td>FSM</td>
<td>36.62</td>
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<td>14.90</td>
<td>6.82</td>
<td>7.06</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several factors may have contributed to this result. A definite change appears to have developed in the manner by which children learn of their culture. Historically, older community members (particularly family and elders) have together played pivotal roles in transference of culture between the generations. However, the data show that the roles of community and family members in transferring culture and social ‘norms’ appear to be lessening in importance.
The data suggest that adoption of external cultural elements may be more attributable to expatriate schoolteachers teaching non-Micronesian culture in the context of traditional activities. More than 18% of the elementary school respondents nominated their schoolteachers as a primary source of their knowledge about their traditional cultures. In countries where transfer of culture between generations has been the domain of family and community elders into recent times, this percentage is high. That it occurs in elementary school suggests that schools and teachers are becoming pivotal forces of cultural learning for a substantial proportion of student populations while traditional methods have decreased in use, effectiveness and importance.

Children’s unprompted and unguided responses to “open” questions show how very strong the impact of external influences on their beliefs and values has become. Those responses strongly suggest potentially critical developments in the thinking and values expressed by those students are occurring (particularly those more traditional elements). If not halted, redirected or otherwise appropriately managed, it is likely these developments will lead to fundamental changes in those cultures during the next decades as today’s children mature and become the decision-makers of their age. Elements of culture that were valued by past generations will not continue into the future but instead move into a mythical past as items of historical interest.

**Influence of expatriate teachers on children’s cultural values**

This apparent shift from traditional, family-based education to a formal, school-based education of cultural material emphasises the importance of schoolteachers being familiar with local lifeways and able to transfer culturally appropriate information to students in ways that are acceptable to local society.

When a large proportion of teachers employed by a community are expatriates, as is the case throughout most of Micronesia (Table 4), the culture transferred may not be Indigenous. Crucial cultural differences between Micronesian communities can be very small and thus difficult to recognise unless immersed in local culture for a prolonged period. Differences can also be vast and easily recognised, and it is very easy for an uninitiated observer to commingle or confuse them. Although it is likely that expatriate teachers will have the very best of intentions, they are unlikely to be sufficiently well grounded in the local community and culture.
At the same time, expatriate teachers are struggling to come to terms with their own role in the development process and the community in which they operate and it is too easy to rely on previous experience and previously developed lesson plans. In such circumstances, it is almost certain that elements of external cultures will be introduced and that with their introduction an associated loss of local traditional culture can occur. For instance, many of the songs, dances and chants nominated by elementary school children as their favourites (Table 3) are not Micronesian but originate from external cultures. While this development should not be attributed to any single cause, several factors are contributing as evidenced in the following three examples.

Anecdotal evidence shows that some Micronesian parents encourage their children to learn and participate in Polynesian dances, particularly Hawaiian and Tahitian. Chapman (2001 §74–§76) reported that in her experience Micronesian cultures were “being submerged particularly by Hawaiian heritage, having their kids doing the hula instead of their own dances… it was in Chuuk and in Pohnpei that they were doing these imported dances.”

The potential that television and advertising have to modify culture is undoubtedly powerful and has been discussed in the literature. That children and adolescents are among the most easily affected by advertising has been well documented (Oswell 2002; Strasburger & Wilson 2002; Murray 1982; Ward 1967; Kniveton 1976). This fact, and the potential that exists for deliberate manipulation by those creating the advertising, is recognised in several European countries (for example Norway, Sweden, Holland, Greece, etc) where some advertising is banned. Other countries (such as Australia and USA) have a more ‘laissez-faire’ approach and tend to depend on industry self-regulation. It may be argued that the likelihood of self-regulation ever being successful is very low. Unless those whose opinions are being manipulated are empowered to accept, modify or deny the advertising, the potential for social manipulation by external sources remains.

Pacific researchers have shown that the introduction of television has had a considerable impact on social interactions of Pacific Islanders. O'Rourke (1982) contrasted the island lifestyle with the influence of American TV programmes and associated advertising, portraying their influence as inappropriate and culturally damaging. He observed that the people of Yap (FSM) were influenced by television programming (with minimal local production) to the extent that Yapese society came
to depend on unnecessary, expensive and mostly imported consumer products. In a study in Palau and the Marshall Islands, Ogden (1991) noted that exposure to television contributed to some young people ignoring their elders and showing disrespect for them which led to disruptions in traditional society. Ogden and Crowl (1993) discuss the extent to which television (and/or videos) have impacted on the socio-cultural environment of the ROP and the RMI. Varan (1993) researched the impact of television in the Cook Islands. Among other effects, he noted the replacement of traditional children’s games with electronic games, changing perceptions of feminine beauty and the concomitant adoption by local girls of unattainable physical ideals of form based on external, western, concepts of beauty.

It is interesting to note that a potentially pan-Pacific culture may be developing. That as much as 22% of the total number of “favourite dances” nominated by respondents across the region were for Hawaiian or Tahitian cultural dances (Table 3) is suggestive. Perhaps closer linkages with other Pacific Island cultures are developing along the lines of the connectedness that Hau‘ofa (1998) and Wendt (1976) both called for. It may well be emerging in other areas as well. For example, electronic discussions (January 2005, Oceanic Anthropology Discussion Group) have been posted on the subject of “Oceanic labels”. In this discussion, Dr. Tim Thomas (2005) wrote of young people from various Oceanic backgrounds adopting the term “Nesian” as a label of association. It has been adapted from the European-imposed labels (polyNESIAN, melaNESIAN, and microNESIAN) and is popular throughout the Pacific, particularly with youth cultures that use it as a form of self-identification.

A New Zealand band called *Nesian Mystik* has developed considerable popularity among Pacific Islander youth. It has been described (New Zealand Musician 2005) as an “Award-winning band that fuses their multi Pacific Island heritages with R 'n' B and Hip Hop.” Other singers (for example Hawaiian singer *Pati*) and bands/groups from other political entities in the Pacific region have associated themselves with the concept. Auckland University of Technology has developed courses based around what it describes as the “Nesian influence” (AUT 2005). This apparent development may presage construction of a broad-based under-culture throughout the Pacific Island States providing linkages for a Pacific-wide youth culture.

Any analysis of the survey data that suggests teachers of non-Micronesian ethnicities are causing a growth in popularity of non-Indigenous cultural elements would be
simplistic indeed and most unwise. Notwithstanding this however, several responses by elementary school children to questions regarding who taught them traditional songs, dances and chants show they learned of these cultural items from their schoolteachers. As many of their stated favourite songs and dances are not culturally Micronesian but originate from external cultures, it may be that the culture and ethnicity of teachers is contributing to children learning (and perhaps adopting) cultural elements belonging to external cultures and not their own. PRAC (2005 p.2) acknowledged that one of “the five major challenges to student achievement in the Pacific Region” was quality of teaching. One of the two areas they identified as impacting on this was a lack of “culturally relevant teaching and learning” material and methods.

**Ethnicity of teachers in Micronesia**

The Guam Department of Education and the CNMI Public School System (PSS) provided details of the ethnicity of teachers employed by them in 2005 (Table 4). In Guam, almost half (46%) of those teachers had an ethnic background that was not Chamorro, with nearly 28% of all teachers being Filipino. These percentages were similar in the CNMI PSS, where a slightly greater percentage (58%) of teachers were of an ethnicity other than Chamorro or Carolinian and 24% were Filipino.

The Micronesian Seminar (MicSem) provided data for two Catholic Schools in the FSM—Our Lady of Mercy Elementary School in Pohnpei and Xavier High School in Chuuk. At Our Lady of Mercy School in Pohnpei, 80% of teachers were ethnic Micronesians while only 23% of teachers were ethnic Micronesians at Xavier High School in Chuuk. Apart from this data provided by MicSem, other data were not available for the FSM or for the RMI.

These figures compare favourably with the situation in the State of Hawaii in the late 1990s. Hawaii has been even more strongly dominated by U.S. culture than have most political entities in Micronesia. Benham and Heck (1998) noted that only eight percent of all public school teachers in the state of Hawaii were native Hawaiian. This was despite the fact that 23% of the entire population of Hawaii, and 24% of all students in the Hawaiian public school system, identified as native Hawaiian.

The data obtained from adult and high school student questionnaire responses show neither considered much of their cultural learning to have come from school or
college. However, 18% of elementary school students credited their schoolteachers with teaching them about their traditions and culture. The importance of the role elementary schoolteachers play in the process of transferring cultural learning appears to have increased, although it is not possible to determine an exact timescale from the data. This different emphasis suggests that the generation entering Micronesia’s education systems today is involved in processes of cultural learning that are themselves significant, but also have a potential to introduce further significant and rapid cultural change.

**Table 4 Ethnicity of School Teachers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PUBLIC SCHOOLS</td>
<td>XAVER HIGH SCHOOL</td>
<td>OUR LADY OF MERCY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micronesian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolinian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chamorro</td>
<td>1,164</td>
<td>225</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chuukese</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kosraean</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marshallese</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palauan</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pohnpeian</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yapese</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub total</td>
<td>1,164</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Micronesian</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>140</td>
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<td>Hispanic</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Indonesian</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Pacific Islander</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub total</td>
<td>996</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>2,160</td>
<td>584</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes  
[1] Source: Guam Department of Education 2005  
[4] Non-pejorative description used by Guam Department of Education

The large number of teachers who identify with an ethnicity that is not Micronesian does not present a problem for preservation of Indigenous cultures of itself. It would be quite incorrect to ‘blame’ any group of teachers for this apparent cultural leakage. Appropriate school curricula, combined with sufficient directly applicable teaching material and provision of suitable specialised teacher training would overcome any
perceived incongruity. A step in the right direction is the Teacher Training Institute mounted annually by the CNMI Council of the Humanities. The CNMI Public School System requires that expatriate teachers in government schools be ‘localised’ and thus provided a foundation in the history and cultures of the CNMI. A shortcoming of the system is that while attendance is compulsory for teachers in government employ, the same does not apply to teachers employed by private, mainly religious, schools. As laudable as these approaches are, they can only be a first step.

Involvement of local community leaders in school management, curricula development and delivery would provide an entirely appropriate method of cultural learning. However, in situations where parents, elders and other community members are unwilling or unable to provide the cultural leadership required, and where teaching staff are not provided with sufficient or appropriate resources, the situation becomes extremely difficult.

**Conclusions**

Further research is required to highlight inadequacies of existing school curricula and to determine reasons for there being insufficient Indigenous teachers available, to define current Micronesian cultural and educational aspirations, and to improve donor educational aid programmes. Micronesians need to be both encouraged and empowered to take control of their school curricula and the transference of their culture to their children. They must decide what their children are to learn and how they will do so. They must decide which elements of their cultures they wish to retain and which they no longer consider important or relevant. These decisions should be theirs alone to make. However, since colonial times (and particularly since the latter half of the twentieth century), their ability to do so has been affected by powerful cultural influences originating from external sources. Included amongst these influences are school curricula that are often based on those of other cultures, expatriate teachers that have not received sufficient training in local cultures and community aspirations, and a lack of “culturally relevant teaching and learning” material and methods (PRAC 2005 p.2).

If Micronesian cultures are not to be subsumed by others, Micronesians must once again be empowered to choose what elements of their cultures are to be maintained. They must also be enabled to decide by what means and under what conditions those
cultures, including traditional knowledge and practices, are to be transferred. Greater involvement by local people in setting curricula, in teacher training, in school management, etc. will help, but perhaps the greatest need is for more appropriate levels of funding and less conditions imposed by donors.

References


O’Rourke, D. (1982) *Yap: How Did You Know We’d Like TV?* Film Australia produced by D O’Rourke.


Thomas, Dr Timothy. Leverhulme Centre for Human Evolutionary Studies, University of Cambridge. Posting to Oceanic Anthropology Discussion Group on Thu, 13 Jan 2005 12:06:53


**Interviews**
