

On My Mind
by Ruth L. Tighe

Is my face red! After having not only pontificated on the proper use of words, but also criticized the carelessness in factual reporting of the local press in recent columns, I find that I myself have committed both errors. I used the word sewerage when I should have used sewage in my column of two weeks ago, and last week made the egregious mistake of declaring that the U.S. House of Representatives consists of 100 members, whereas it actually consists of more than 400. Thanks to a pair of eagle-eyed readers for calling the errors to my attention. And my apologies to all concerned!

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Out of touch with late-week local happenings, as I am on Guam for cataract surgery, let me voice some concerns of a more general nature. It disturbs me, for example, when well-meaning but ignorant outsiders accuse Micronesians of lacking in work ethics, having poor work habits, and incurring high rates of absenteeism. The latest instance comes from a joint World Bank/International Finance Corporation report on Palau's investment environment as reported in a recent issue of the <I>Marianas Variety</I>.

There is little argument that, historically speaking, Micronesians - and most Pacific Islanders, I would venture to say - generally have not met more developed countries' level of expectation in regard to work ethics and work habits. But then, neither have Micronesians, and other Pacific Islanders, lived under the same conditions as most developed countries. They have not, for example, had to face seasonal extremes, which make it necessary to plant and harvest and preserve foodstuffs in the summer, so that one can survive the winter. For people in the tropics, food is readily available all year round.

Nor have they, until relatively recently, been exposed to the industrialism, urbanization, mass production, and other patterns of living and working where, in many cases, human endeavor is controlled by artificial and arbitrary schedules unrelated to either the cycles of nature or natural cycles of demand and supply..

Yet their lives were not work free. There was work for everyone - men, women, and children. Each had his or her task in providing for daily necessities, from weaving nets, building houses, constructing and maintaining canoes and outriggers to weaving ropes and sails, fishing, and caring for crops of taro and rice. Their survival, and that of their families, depended on the existence of a work ethic, on dedication to good work habits. There has been a change, over time, in the kind of work done at village fiestas, weddings and funerals and their related ceremonies, but there still is a massive amount of work required, from slaughtering pigs and cows to putting up the tents and collecting tables, to preparing and serving the food. Generally, there is no lack of work ethic, no failure of work habits, no absenteeism here.

That Micronesians, and Pacific Islanders as a whole, are seen as lacking those qualities, is to judge them by outsider - and largely by Western/European - standards, not by their own. In their

lives, such qualities have always existed and continue to exist. That they do not seem to have transferred those qualities to the outsider-imposed work requirements and that, therefore these qualities are not as evident in a developed setting, is a matter of ownership, motivation, and acculturation. It should be treated with respect and understanding, not scorn and derision.

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I am also bothered by the statement, made in more than one context/setting, that "the decision should be left up to the community." The sentiment is fine, but in practice, the idea often does not work all that well, because the community has no experience upon which to base the kind of decisions asked of it.

For example, it has been said that the design - or elements of the design - of the CNMI's new prison complex should be left to the community to define and decide. But prison construction - indeed, the whole field of penology - is a very complex subject, and has gone through many changes over the years. At one time, severe punishment for those who committed crimes was believed the best way to reduce crime, but studies have shown that this is not so. In economic terms, moreover, it makes more sense to try to rehabilitate those who have committed crimes, so that they may again become productive members of the community, rather than to lock them up forever, feeding them and housing them at government expense. Even the question of what constitutes rehabilitation continues to undergo change.

The design of prisons to promote and encourage successful rehabilitation is different from the design of prisons whose sole function is to house - and perhaps punish - prisoners. How many members of the community are aware of the changing philosophies in the treatment of those who have been found guilty of committing a crime? How many members of the community are aware of, or understand, the complexities of good prison design?

Another area where local officials have said "leave it to the community" is the area of school social studies curricula. The same kind of questions apply. How many members of the community are familiar with the options available? How many are knowledgeable about the varying educational principles involved?

The community should, of course, be involved in such decisions. But in order for such participation to be meaningful, the community must become familiar with, and knowledgeable about, the concerns at issue. Those who would solicit community input must, therefore, first make sure that the community understands the issues at stake, and acquires the background and the information to make reasonable, intelligent, and informed decisions. To do otherwise is risky, as well as a cop-out.

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The making of informed and intelligent decisions depends, among other things, upon the avail-

ability of complete, accurate and impartially-presented accounts, unbiased analyses of issues, reasoned discussions of pros and cons. The media tends to be a major source of such "resources," especially where local issues are concerned. But the "infrastructure," so to speak, of the media in the CNMI gets in the way of delivery of such services.

To begin with, the people who staff the print media are not from the CNMI. The CNMI's issues are not theirs, and they've not lived with - and often have not learned - the history, the background of the people or the CNMI as a whole. English is their second language. They have experience with a media quite different in style from that of the U.S.

Moreover, they are contract workers. They are not as free to write what they choose, to report what they see, as are most journalists. They are beholden to their employer, the publishers. In this instance, there are also shortcomings on the part of the employers. Neither of the publishers on island can be said to be impartial, thus hampering unbiased reporting even more.

In this small place, however, replacing the contract journalists with local journalists - assuming any were to be found - would not necessarily solve the problems. Local journalists would be under tremendous pressure from their families, from the politicians, in regard to what they reported, and how they reported it. The chances of getting accurate, unbiased, impartial coverage of news and issues would not, in short, be much better.

There is no easy solution to the problem. Mainland reporters, for example, might be better writers, but would not necessarily be any more informed of local issues. Thus, the best approach is to read carefully and skeptically, to look for what's missing, to ask questions, and never to unquestioningly accept as the whole truth what is found in the press.