

On My Mind
by Ruth L. Tighe

In her latest book, "Poisonwood Bible," author Barbara Kingsolver harshly criticizes America's intervention in the politics of the African republic of Zaire. It was the U.S., apparently, that supported the murder of the country's ruler Patrice Lumumba, and that engineered the rise to power of his successor, the uneducated (puppet) Mobutu. Under the pretense of leading an underdeveloped country to economic self-sufficiency, U.S. actions in Zaire, instead, have led to increased violence and corruption, growing poverty and curtailment of personal liberty.

On the surface, the book is about an American missionary family sent to Zaire to "convert the heathen." Throughout the book, the father remains as stubborn and as insensitive to the ways of his new home as when he first arrived and rejected his housekeeper's suggestions on how to prevent flooding of his vegetable garden. He insists on trying to baptize converts by immersion in the nearby river, even though the people try to explain that the crocodiles in the river make that far too dangerous.

Again and again, the family flounders because its members cannot speak the native language, do not understand the local ways, set up barriers between themselves and the villagers, persist in trying to maintain their own customs and habits in a country totally unfamiliar to them.

Eventually, the family abandons the father. One daughter dies; another becomes a colonialist, the third accompanies the mother back home, and only the fourth adapts to Zaire, marrying one of its "native sons" and working with him toward a more enlightened country.

While the U.S. presence in Micronesia has not been quite so blatant, and has not - at least so far as is known - been responsible for either the election or defeat of any of Micronesia's political leaders, there are many parallels between the Kingsolver story and the reality of Micronesia's present condition. A particularly detailed account of just what impact the U.S. has had on development in the various Micronesian entities is David Hanlon's recent book, "Re-making Micronesia - Discourse over Development in a Pacific Territory 1944-1982."

Hanlon's thesis is that the U.S., starting with the "occupation" by the U.S. Navy at the end of World War II, consistently ignored the existing social and economic infrastructure of the various Micronesian entities, and instead, insisted on imposing a Western urban system of beliefs, values and customs.

In the twentieth century, the term "development," according to Hanlon, has come to mean "the productive capabilities of a colonized population that could be employed in the establishment of a modern market economy." Economic development, as the U.S. applied it to Micronesia in particular, involved a "normalization of the islands and their people," and was used as one of "the techniques of power, one of the dividing practices, employed to rationalize American domination of the islands."

Moreover, notes Hanlon, : "...a scrutiny of the Compact of Free Association...suggests that

economic development remains subordinate and subservient as it always has been in American Micronesia to the dictates of strategic politics.”

The U.S. has been accused, in fact, of “buying out Micronesia not with the prospects of genuine economic development but with ‘imported food, tobacco, alcohol, and government payroll checks’ that only insured the continued dependence of the area on the United States.”

In his discussion of the impact of the war and the islands’ administration by the U.S. Navy that followed, of early attempts at introducing commercial ventures, of the Solomon plan and subsequent economic development plans for the Micronesian entities, of the introduction of systems of political representation, and of the impact of federal welfare programs on the Micronesian islands, Hanlon gives example after example of U.S. arrogance, ignorance and insensitivity to the culture, customs, and lifestyle of the people of Micronesia.

Typical of this behavior was the donation of work pants to needy villagers in Pohnpei by the Navy. The officer in charge decided it would be appropriate to give a pair to a major chief on the island in recognition of his status. But when the chief wore the pants to Kolonia the next day, the island’s executive officer criticized the chief for wearing pants that were meant for the poor. Notes Hanlon, “the story underscores conflicting notions of need, protocol and propriety that would haunt America’s efforts at economic development in the islands for decades to come.”

“To ask the Kapinga to fish commercially, Pohnpeians to farm for profit, or the Yapese to accept complacently the presence of a tourist enterprise on their land was to challenge in serious, disruptive ways the cultural order of these islands and the histories that had informed them,” writes Hanlon.

Reading Hanlon’s description of the process used to prepare economic development plans for all the entities - each entity’s plan was heavily edited both by on-site consultants and federal mainland officials to the point where the plans became so homogenized that they could hardly be distinguished from one another - adds a whole new dimension to an understanding of the antipathy of most Micronesians towards the concept of planning.

Even at the time, the requirement for such plans struck the islanders as excessive. As Hanlon notes, “Thinking it ironic that the world’s leading capitalist economy would be insisting upon a national development plan, representatives of the FSM, during the course of negotiations over the compact, facetiously asked their American counterparts for a copy of the United States’ national development plan, or if that were unavailable, a copy of the development plan for New York City. They received neither because neither development plan had ever existed.”

Hanlon’s book serves as valuable documentation and useful reminder that America’s values, customs, beliefs and culture were and are not native to the people of Micronesia; that Micronesian customs, beliefs and culture are vastly different from those of the U.S.; and that expecting Micronesians to whole-heartedly adopt America’s ways is equivalent to expecting them to relinquish all trace of their own historic and unique island ways.

<center>* * *</center>

Speaking of hand-outs and give-aways, it strikes me as peculiar, to say the least, that in none of the discussions about student scholarships has the subject of eligibility for scholarships been raised. It would appear that there is an assumption that all students are equally deserving of scholarships - a give-away mentality if there ever was one.

With less money for scholarships available, wouldn't it make more sense to re-examine the criteria for awarding scholarships in the first place, rather than to insist that ALL scholarship money be restored? More stringent guidelines for scholarship eligibility and for scholarship amounts, based on need and merit, could go a long way towards easing the shortage of scholarship funds for needy, deserving students.

<center>* * *</center>

Last week, we mentioned the "hunger site" on the web as supporting a worthy cause. Another has been brought to our attention: "greatergood.com". This site promises to give 5% of anything purchased through its "mall" to the charity of your choice. The "mall" would appear to include a wide range of well-known on-line sales sites, including amazon.com, and a rather long list of charities (make sure to click on the "other charities" option).

<center>* * *</center>

If you found this column of interest, won't you recommend it to a friend? Thanks!