

On My Mind
9/29/00

Though much of the content of the "other" paper is often tedious and biased, on occasion a gem emerges that makes having endured all the rest worthwhile. Such a gem appears on page 6 of the September 27 issue of the <I>Tribune</I>. In a column - which is presumably considered the publisher's corner - publisher John S. DelRosario, Jr. raises a very fundamental issue that is long overdue for some long and serious discussion. It is raised honestly, thoughtfully, respectfully - with no discernible bias, none of the usual arrogance.

Too much of the music and dance performed for the tourists in the CNMI, says DelRosario, is not local, but is Polynesian. That is no way to perpetuate local arts and culture, he says. Locals are involved in that they are the performers, but the dances are not local. They are Tahitian, rather than Chamorro or Carolinian. "Is it [that] really a cultural display of who and what we are?" he asks.

Tourism is a highly competitive business. Many other places in the Pacific have the same "sun, sky and seas" that attract tourists to the CNMI - from Guam and Hawaii to Tahiti, Palau and Australia's Great Barrier Reef. To attract tourists to the CNMI, the CNMI must offer something less expensive or more exclusive - something different, or better yet, something unique.

What the CNMI has that is different is its culture, its heritage, its art and music and dance. They are unique to the CNMI. It would make sense, therefore, to feature them as tourist attractions, as something that is not available elsewhere, as something unique that is available only to tourists who come to the CNMI. Instead, what tourists are being offered are performances of the Hawaiian hula, or Polynesian fire dances, or those Tahitian hip-swings - imitations, if you will, of dances from other places.

Instead of featuring indigenous music and dance, preference appears to be given to the performance of non-local music and dance at tourist hotels, in tourist events, at art festivals and the like. Not only does this present a false image of the CNMI's culture to the tourist, but it also discourages those who would perform the local dances because they are given no opportunity to perform, no venue. And this, in turn, discourages maintenance and perpetuation of local arts and culture.

Accepting that only indigenous music and dance truly display the culture of the CNMI, the next thorny issue, DelRosario says, is "How far do we wish to commercialize our cultural music and dances?" A thorny issue indeed.

With the struggle to maintain cultural integrity becoming increasingly difficult in light of ever more invasive technology, with the need ever more pressing to find new ways of persuading tourists to come to the CNMI in light of our still-sagging economy, the questions posed by DelRosario deserve not only serious consideration but also prompt resolution.

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Another issue - among the many that confront the CNMI - is how to address federal concerns that the CNMI's foreign workers have no political voice, do not have a right to cast a vote in local elections. American Samoa, the CNMI's south Pacific counterpart of sorts, is considering doing something about it. The territory's governor and lieutenant governor, who are running for re-election, have pledged to give political rights to foreigners who have lived in American Samoa for twenty years or more, according to a story in the September 26 issue of the <I>Variety</I>.

Presumably, foreign workers there, as here, have not had that right up until now, though the U.S. Congress does not seem to either care or be aware, since there has been no indication that American Samoa is under pressure to change its laws in this regard.

If it works for American Samoa, would a similar law in the CNMI be acceptable to the feds? to the indigenous population?

It should not be necessary to travel to American Samoa to compare notes, but it might be worth spending some time on the 'net, and via e-mail, to see how our compatriots down under are coping with issues similar to ours. Thinking 'out of the box,' as the expression goes, can work wonders.....

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More off the wall than out of the box is the thinking reported in a Reuters story that appeared in the <I>Variety</I> yesterday: the U.S. Congress plans to pass a law that would allow U.S.-made drugs sold to foreign countries to be re-purchased by American pharmacies and wholesalers for sale in the U.S. Why? Because "the high cost of prescription drugs [is] a key election year issue" and apparently bringing American-made drugs back into the U.S. - even with the postal charges to send them overseas and bring them back - would make the drugs sold outside the U.S. less costly to most Americans than would purchasing the ones made to be sold within the U.S.

Surely there's a simpler way to reduce the cost of drugs to the American consumer?

No wonder there's such distrust of international trade agreements and global conglomerates!

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Speaking of simplifying things, wouldn't it be nice if the local papers learned to use computer graphics to do their stories on budgets and other number-based subjects? Yesterday's <I>Variety</I> story on the CNMI's general fund expenditure report just overflowed with numbers - of both dollars and years.

It would have been so much easier to understand - and have had so much more impact - if the story could have been done as a bar graph to contrast the changes over the years in the amounts allocated to personnel, office rentals, travel. Having to try make those contrasts in linear fashion is frustrating and confusing. Isn't it a goal of good reporting - to make things easy to

understand?

It really shouldn't be all that difficult. Nor should it involve any costly additional software. Computers nowadays all come equipped with Excel or similar number-manipulating programs as standard fare. One would think that any self-respecting publisher would have seen to it, by now, that his staff acquired - and used - the skills that would enable them to handle those programs.

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While on the subject of things unique (see the first item), I was privileged to participate in a unique event last week: the first Bar Mitzvah ever conducted in the CNMI. The Jewish Bar Mitzvah is a ceremony somewhat similar to the Catholic's first communion: it marks the passage of a child to a higher level of responsibility. In Catholic practice the taking of first communion, which usually occurs when children turn seven, signifies that they are now responsible for their conduct in the eyes of the church, that they are old enough to go to confession and receive penance, as well as take communion.

In Judaism, the Bar Mitzvah (for a boy; for a girl it is called a Bat Mitzvah) takes place once a boy reaches the age of thirteen. It signifies that the boy has now matured and is old enough to be counted as one of the ten people required to form a minyan. Jewish tradition calls for the presence of a minyan for the conduct of a communal religious service.

While other Jewish ceremonies have been held on Saipan over the years - celebrations of Rosh Hashanah or the new year, the Seder of Passover, the ending of the Yom Kippur fast - the celebration of a Bar Mitzvah had never before been performed.

It was, therefore, a doubly moving and momentous occasion, not only as the rite of passage for a serious and devout thirteen year-old, and for his parents, grandparents and other relatives but also, for all who were privileged to attend, as an affirmation of the strength and durability of the Jewish faith.

As has been true of the other Jewish celebrations here, there was no rabbi to conduct the service. The members of the family led the prayers and the songs, with family and friends leading the readings, providing explanation of the various symbols and procedures. It took a lot of love, courage, piety, and imagination to put the ceremony together, to make sure even the youngest member of the family had a role to perform, to obtain all the parts and pieces from the ceremonial tallis to the sacred Torah, to rehearse the sequences, the readings, the singing. For the Bar Mitzvah'd neophyte, it took a lot of dedication and effort to learn to read the Hebrew text, and a lot of imagination to boot to prepare his own comments for the occasion. Both the "producer" and the "star" were first class.

A beautiful, up-lifting, impressive occasion.