

On My Mind  
12/1/00

An interesting cultural impasse arose at a public meeting in Tanapag last night as a spokesman for the Tanapag Action Group (TAG) accused federal officials in attendance of being liars, and threatened a boycott of future meetings by TAG members. The meetings are conducted weekly by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACE), its contractor, and the CNMI's Division of Environmental Quality (DEQ), to keep villagers informed of the progress being made in cleaning up PCB contamination in the village. The meetings are also attended by representatives of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and, on occasion, by officials from the Department of Public Health.

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The TAG spokesman opened the meeting with an unexpectedly short but heated speech, claiming villagers had been lied to regarding the level of PCB contamination in taro, that villagers had, in fact, been lied to "from the very beginning," and that there was no point in villagers attending meetings any more because the information being given them couldn't be trusted, whereupon he got up and stormed out of the meeting hall.

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No explanation was provided as to where the alleged lies about taro contamination had occurred, or what other alleged "lies" the TAG membership may have found.

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No opportunity was provided to examine whatever the evidence, to investigate the accusations, to explain the seeming disparities.

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The confrontational style of the presentation is apparently typical of the way many disagreements are dealt with in the local culture. There is no lowering of voices. There is no tempering of the rhetoric. There is no opportunity for reasoned discussion.

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Cultural custom also calls for absolute respect for elders. One does not criticize them. One does not contradict or correct them.

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Which leaves everyone else in a dilemma. How should information on the project's progress now be reported? How can the concerns of the members of TAG be resolved? Who can be called upon to provide missing information? Who can be called upon to serve as intermediary between a younger generation that has the technical knowledge and elders in whom that knowledge may be lacking? Should the meetings continue? Would anyone attend? How can reasoned dialogue be initiated, maintained?

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Often, it takes years - if not generations - to overcome such a generational, cultural, gap. But that luxury is not available in this instance. Some sort of resolution must be found now, so that work on PCB removal may continue smoothly, so that resolution of associated issues may be undertaken, so that villager concerns may be eased.

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Unfortunately, that solution does not seem readily at hand. It is conceivable that now that the anger has been aired, the "threat" made, relationships will simply revert to where they'd stood

before, but at the moment, it is not clear that that will indeed occur.

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For what it's worth, and to try and clarify the issue a little, the misunderstanding about the degree of taro contamination - of particular concern, the TAG spokesman had said, because this is harvest season for taro, and most of it has already been gathered and given out - may rest in the differing numerical schemes used to report taro contamination in two separate reports of PCB contamination surveys that have been issued. One report shows the degree of contamination in mg/kg (i.e., 0.000084 mg/kg), the other reports it in ug/kg (i.e., 0.084 ug/kg) - a not inconsiderable difference, visually speaking, though not in actuality.

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Or the misunderstanding could be a result of not understanding the significance of the discrepancies between reports of results from field tests and results from lab tests.

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There may well be other bases for the misunderstandings. But without communication, there is no opportunity to correct the misconceptions, which is unfortunate, to say the least.

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On the subject of misconceptions, the controversy over vote counts in the on-going Gore-Bush fracas has certainly been an eye-opener. The realization that thousands of ballots are not counted or are mis-counted, throughout the states at every election, comes as a shock. Surely something as serious as the presidential election cannot be so rife with anomalies?

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But then, the realization that the election of the leader of the world's most powerful nation is accomplished through the use of 50 dissimilar ballots, using 50 dissimilar formats, is almost equally shocking. States' rights are all very well, but as has now been shown most unambiguously, there are times when national uniformity would seem a far more critical concern.

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The question is, once the election is over, will the lessons stick? Will enough members of the U.S. Congress even care - or find a way to agree - about reforming presidential election procedures? Perhaps that will depend on who loses, and what he does about it?

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One "lesson," on the local scene, that has seemingly not stuck, regards the use of balloons to commemorate special occasions. Balloons released on islands float out to sea, where they are often consumed by turtles and other sea life. Since the balloons are indigestible, they clog the intestines, with the result that the turtles, to whom balloons look like jelly fish, one of their favorite foods, starve to death instead.

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Surely we can find other ways to celebrate occasions such as the marking of Mental Health Awareness Month, which was observed earlier this week, and at which dozens of balloons were released into the air?

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The search for authentic island crafts gets particularly frustrating at this time of year. There's not much available on island to send to the mainland as Christmas gifts that isn't available more readily and at lower prices there than here. What with 800 numbers and on-line purchasing, it is, of course, possible to do one's gift-buying in virtual mainland style - the only difference being that one can't touch the merchandise - see and feel it for one's self.

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But if island-style gift-giving is wanted, the task is not that easy. Two new and little-known candidates for Christmas giving are compact disks of local music available, at the moment, only through the college. The first, titled "Uma'tuna Si Yu'us" or "Oratorium," consists of religious songs representative of each parish in the CNMI, including Rota and Tinian. The CDs are available for \$10.00 each from Herbert Rosario, Archivist at NMC. There is a book to accompany the CD; it contains the lyrics to the songs.

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The second CD is titled "Hinalom Tunadin Marianas" or "Marianas Rhapsody," which is historic in nature and contains songs from the Spanish, German and Japanese times. It sells for \$14.40 and is available at the NMC bookstore.

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Two more are forthcoming, but may not be ready for Christmas giving - the CD's are still sitting in California. One bears the title, "Sonadon I Islas Marianas" or "Special Songs of the Marianas," and the fourth consists of Carolinian songs and is titled "Amway'ul Letipal Luughey1 'Ang" o"Glory to God in Heaven." All but the third are instrumental. The fourth includes vocals.

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The work of the first three was done by Jim Ellis and Bruno Dalla Pozza of the college under a grant; the fourth was done independently.

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There are plans to make the recordings available at the Arts Council on Capitol Hill and/or at the Museum on Middle Road, but at the moment, they are available only at NMC.

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It should be mentioned that there are some handicrafts for Christmas purchase available at the Arts Council, as well as numerous paintings, sculptures, ceramics and photographic art works.