

Comments on Political Future of Micronesia¹

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The problem to which these remarks are addressed is the manner in which village Micronesians are, or are not, participating in the dialogue at higher levels regarding their future political status. By "village Micronesian" I mean the *many* who are living in small communities and hamlets on the main islands and in the outlying atolls, as distinguished from the relatively *few* who crowd together in the district centers of the Trust Territory. These who comprise the "many" are significantly different from the "few" in the weight of tradition manifested in their style of living, in the limited exposure to Western society and custom, in the relatively little impact of economic development programs, and in the restricted opportunity available even today for expanding their horizons beyond atoll and island boundaries.

The following observations are based on sketchy and incomplete information, as no systematic survey of the problem has been undertaken by anyone. I am more certain of my ground with respect to the Truk, Ponape, and Marshalls districts, but have some reason to believe that it may be equally valid for the western Carolines and at least some of the Marianas. Regard my comments, therefore, not necessarily as fact but as worthy of consideration for further thought and research.

Relatively few village Micronesians, outside the district centers, appear to be informed, or even very much concerned, about the future political status of the Trust islands. They are concerned very much with the everyday problems of supply and transportation, of medical assistance, and of economic welfare generally.

In recent years the transistor radio and district center broadcasts have done a lot to overcome the isolation of outlying populations, but villagers seem to be mainly interested in the musical programs and in the news that relates more directly to village affairs, such as field trip schedules, changes in the price of copra, land court decisions, etc. Other news media, mimeographed or printed in the vernacular, supplement the radio to some degree.

Peace Corps Volunteers in the past three years have become significant dispensers of opinion and information about the outside world, especially when, as individuals, they are interested and willing to spend time talking with villagers, quite apart from their formal responsibilities in the school or dispensary. But it also appears to be the case that PCV's tend to develop this interchange with only a few families, individuals, or key officials in the village.

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Somewhat akin to the PCV's, a few American contract teachers in public schools in the outer islands have taken the trouble to learn the local language and to relate their activities to adults in the community as well as to children in school. Micronesian teachers in the same schools, especially if they have kin in the village, also serve as intermediaries in passing along ideas and information about happenings beyond the village boundaries. Health aides, agricultural agents, and for briefer periods of time, field trip officials have an association with local people that is largely restricted to the areas of their technical competence.

Recent reports indicate that CAA (OEO) project workers, where they are assigned away from the district centers, can be effective providers of general information, owing to the more comprehensive scope of many of these projects. Not to be overlooked are the students in higher education who return to the village, at least on visits, and informally educate their kinfolk and friends about events at the district or territorial level. Individuals and families who have been away from the village in gainful employment at district centers or on military projects, as on Kwajalein, present other possibilities for similar education.

In the dissemination of information on political status questions, certain requirements of communication and of trust characterize the relationships between villagers, municipal officials, district legislators, and congressmen. The ties are firmest, of course, between the villagers and their own municipal officials or sub-district leaders. As one moves up the hierarchy of district and territorial officials, the villagers tend to feel ignored or lack confidence in the ability of these officials to properly represent their real concerns. The local officials busy themselves with local problems and, in council or community meetings, the villagers do participate in decisions about land, taxes, school support, etc., but even here the influence of the local officials in formulating opinion is perhaps strongest among their own kinsmen or local factions that follow their lead.

District legislators generally provide little feedback on their activities for the communities which elected them. In some districts it is the custom for local radio stations to play back taped transcripts of legislative sessions, but without analysis of the events by an impartial commentator. The elections themselves seem to emphasize kin and other traditional bonds or the personality of the candidate, rather than a conscious appraisal of issues. The Micronesian Congressmen are rarely seen in the village community, although they may be heard from time to time in speeches made on the radio. Until last year most Congressmen held positions in the district centers which made it impossible, or at least difficult, for them to develop any kind of people-to-people relationship in the outlying villages. Now that Congressmen have had to choose between administrative jobs and the legislative role, this situation may improve as they find more time available to get in touch with villagers in the areas they represent.

What can be done to establish a more informed electorate, one able to undertake knowledgeable consideration of the issues that relate to the future status of Micronesians? It seems to me that any educational program might best be co-

ordinated by the Congress of Micronesia, the most effective voice of Micronesia to date. Congressmen, travelling as individuals or in small groups, could explain to municipal officials and to gatherings of villagers the various status alternatives and their implications for local village welfare. Translated into locally meaningful terms, their views could be put on the radio and recorded in other news media accessible to the villagers. Such person-to-person contacts, many of them conducted on field trips, need to be supplemented by written materials and visual aids in order to minimize subsequent distortions of oral reports as these tend to develop in village rumor and gossip. These presentations, for maximum informational effectiveness, should be related to local needs and concerns. I must emphasize this point.

A suggestion was made by one informant that it would be well to have Congressmen from another district make such presentations so that Congressmen, legislators, and municipal officials of the district in question would be on the "same side of the table" and, in that way, could raise questions and make statements on behalf of the villagers rather than be put in the position of seeming to lecture to their own constituencies. One needs to be reminded that most villagers do not now have enough understanding of the status matter to know what questions to ask.

If an informational program were launched immediately, it would still be unrealistic to consider a plebiscite before 1975. The presently constituted Micronesian Status Commission will have required two full years to become sufficiently informed on all possible status alternatives before submitting a report and recommendations to the Congress. Careful thought will be required in developing a program to educate the villagers if public opinion is to be effectively incorporated into the decision-making process. It may be difficult to sustain village interest in topics which appear to them to lie beyond their immediate concern, and the danger exists that over-education may easily lead to boredom or anti-climax. Properly encouraged to participate on an informed basis, village Micronesians could well provide the necessary support for Micronesian Congress status demands in order that these might be more seriously considered by the U. S. Government. In another place I have referred to this kind of ground support as "Kanaka power," elevating a label of disdain in European-islander contact history to a symbol of pride in identity after the fashion of "Black power" as now well known in the United States.

If such a program is not launched, or maintained successfully, one is left with the alternative that Micronesian participation in decisions about the future status of the trust area must be left to the Congress of Micronesia who in their individual and collective judgments represent those who elected them. Or, because pan-Micronesia as applied to the Trust Territory is still largely an ideal, any assessment of Micronesian preferences in the several districts may better be undertaken by reference to the opinions of district legislators. At the district level, one will not be surprised to discover conflicting opinions on political status, for example, to become independent or to join with a U. S. state or territorial possession, whereas

the Congress of Micronesia might be expected to strive for unification of the Trust islands in order to improve its own bargaining position vis-à-vis the United States government. In either case, the danger in these alternatives is that Micronesian elites may simply substitute for the present American territorial authority and continue the exploitation or neglect of village Micronesians, by not having nourished a closer bond of communication and trust with the populace.