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Nicholas J. Goetzfridt

University of Guam, ngoetzfr@uog9.uog.edu

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Pacific Book Epistemologies

by **Nicholas J. Goetzfridt** (Professor of Library Science, Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Library, University of Guam)
<ngoetzfr@uog9.uog.edu>

Editor's Note: *Guam, a territory of the United States, is 3806 miles WSW from Hawaii. The 2000 census showed a population of 154,805. Chamorro, the indigenous population, predominates. "In order to understand librarianship in Micronesia without automatically using professional tenets to draw a comfortable connection between society and libraries, it is important to fit indigenous cultural contexts into the picture as well. There are many examples of communally expected and enforced behaviors in Micronesia, such as secrecy and respect for elders, that one can use to construct a more realistic, dynamic force between texts and the social environments in which they exist."* — NG

The epistemologies of indigenous peoples in the Pacific, like those epistemologies American library historian **Jesse Shera** caajoed his colleagues to recognize in understanding a public's need for a library, often seem to me to be doomed to be neglected by librarianship. I think of **William Faulkner's** adage — "the past isn't dead; it isn't even past." It's an adage that, in the long historical march of our profession's effort to promote the centrality of a library in society, often doesn't fit in with the American librarianship of the Pacific and specifically in the island worlds of Guam and Micronesia with which I am most familiar. It is difficult to see the role of financially unsupported libraries in the daily life of Micronesians and it seems (at least to me) difficult not to miss the contentious nature of promoting libraries on Guam in light of their actual use. I feel, however, that I am committing a kind of blasphemy among my colleagues for even bringing the matter up.

It is not that I think libraries have no value in Guam or Micronesia — the latter of which has been under colonial powers since the 1600's, a period of more than 300 years first by the Spanish, then the Americans, then the Japanese, and then the Americans again. On the contrary, I hold the same general values of anyone who goes into this profession — that "books" — better yet in the context of our technological times, "information" — do or does empower individuals and hold the potential to enrich lives and change them for the better.

The problem that I see in our context, however, is that libraries in Micronesia and Guam are rooted in American colonialism that on Guam began with the American seizure of the island during the Spanish-American War in 1898. In 1944 Micronesia was seized as American forces worked their way through the islands against Japanese resistance through often-furious battles. After World War II, the United States received a United Nation's mandate to administer Micronesia (hundreds of islands spread across an area of the Pacific larger than the United States) as a

single entity called the U.S. Territory of the Pacific Islands. Despite long, concerted efforts by American administrators to hold this single entity of numerous distinctive cultures and languages together, it eventually fell apart. The Northern Mariana Islands pursued a commonwealth status with the United States and the Micronesian islands became two independent countries, the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of the Marshall Islands while Palau attained free association status with the U.S.

American influence and financial benefits due to the strategic placement of Guam and Micronesia on the world's geo-political stage have had a significant impact on their peoples. One could say that the American influence has been stronger on Guam than on Micronesia where indigenous languages remain unthreatened. On Guam, a concerted Americanization effort has left an indelible American imprint and a subsequent cultural search for identity (indigenous Chamorro students were at one time punished and fined for speaking their language at school). Trying to encapsulate "culture" from the outside produces a biased perspective on those who are attached through history and heritage. Individuals, of course, differ even if they function in a communally based society in which American values of individualism take a back seat to communal concepts, whether these concepts reside in communally related families, or in a broader sense of a people.

Into this *mélange* came the American public library with its professional heritage and sense of its mission and self-worth developed over at least a 150-year period beginning with **Melvil Dewey's School of Library Economy** at **Columbia University** in 1887. The library came to Micronesia with a wide range of other American governmental, social, and economic institutions following World War II with **President Johnson's** "Great Society" and "War on Poverty" whose income standards made almost all Micronesians eligible.

Many library collections originated from book "donations" made by the military and from mainland sources whose typically aged value was questionable as is often the case today. Many such books in Micronesia sit irrelevantly on shelves but visually contribute to the image of what is often heard referred to in almost reverent terms by Micronesians as "The Library." Although the per capita library commitments of local government administrations have always been woefully low compared to U.S. mainland standards, there have been library branches established in several villages. This is an indirect result of Guam's militarily strategic position in the Pacific and its tourism industry, largely Japanese.

The **University of Guam's Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Library (RFK)** is not

really an amalgamation of these historical and cultural factors, but rather a library supporting undergraduate and graduate programs not unlike colleges or universities in Middle America. We could have used **Elfreda Chatman** to understand the dynamics that go on when students come to this American library from unique communal backgrounds where protocols often define what information is shared. Neither **Elfreda Chatman** nor her influence has been here. The fact that **Chatman's** relatively recent work on information "insiders" and "outsiders" among minorities and elderly and incarcerated women was "groundbreaking" in librarianship says much about the tenaciousness of our self-promotional vision when such work already has had a very long history in other social sciences.

Our efforts to build our collections are, by necessity, guided by the university's majors and the multiplexed fields of knowledge under which they fall. The long, quick march into technological change that we are engaged in essentially follows the same standards that one would expect of a university library with moderate financial resources. The **RFK Library** had for a long time been on the back burner of development, — perhaps encompassing, in some immeasurable way, the heritage of Micronesian oral, communal communication of information that one still senses today.

Age of the library's collection was a recognized problem at the **RFK Library** for librarians and certainly for those who used the library. This problem, unfortunately, perpetuated an entrenched stereotype of the **RFK Library** as a library having minimal resources, something almost expected on a tropical island with government and education problems. Some new faculty pooh-poohed the **RFK Library** and even the idea of the library having potential for richness of materials. Newcomers still remember the great graduate collections that enriched their intellectual lives over the course of their graduate studies.

After I, myself, returned from doctoral work at the **University of Wisconsin** in 1997, I undertook an examination of the age of the entire book collection, the product of which was a colored bar graph for each subject area. Before and after publication dates in the 1970s, the bars inched up onto the snow heights of Kilimanjaro. As the graph came closer to our time there was a slide deep into **Hemingway's** pebbly stream.

About the same time, university accreditation concerns, including the library, led to a massive influx of acquisition funds that suddenly needed to be spent. New books had to be processed before the accreditation team arrived. Part of the aftermath of that period has been a stabilization of funding — a phenomenon previously unheard. We have en-

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gaged in considerable revamping of resources to make the **RFK Library** a respectable collection extending beyond the book stacks to numerous electronic databases and online journals (click on "electronic resources" at www.uog.edu/RFKLibrary). Also, resources sharing capabilities provide faculty and students with relatively quick responses to their requests often within a day or two. Today's processing is certainly far quicker and more profoundly influential in the library's service capabilities. This contrasts with the practice of more than a decade ago when multi-part typed forms were mailed to Hawaii or California. This was a kind of Pacific pony express undertaking: "Hope-the-rider-gets-through-the-whales-and-back-with-a-response-before-it's-too-late."

Although the reputation of the **RFK Library** has improved due in part to the accreditation panic blast of money and subsequent consistency of budget allocation, convincing some faculty and especially new faculty fresh from a larger library is still somewhat of a challenge. It is perhaps even an interesting study in the constructive factors of reality. Following the devastation of World War II on Guam, the **University** has grown from a humble teacher training institution to an accredited **University** whose students can transfer credits and degrees to most colleges and universities on the U.S. mainland.

The context in which Guam has evolved in both book and electronic resources occurs in the nebulous influences of a past that is unlike other American regions. The issue of Chamorro self-determination has within it, not only the demands for enabling a people to determine their political status apart from colonialism, but also to select from the milieu of American values and identity that are never far away. Chamorros have historically adapted and readapted to a number of American influences for over one hundred years in addition to other cultures and societies which have made Guam their home. Chamorros, themselves, hold different opinions on the issue of self-determination. In a public sense of a communally felt context, support for the idea of self-determination is inevitable, at the least, and speaks to the quiet conflicts into which the American library slipped.

Micronesia, with nine distinctive languages, also has interpretative values and different levels of access to information, based on cultural heritage and contemporary needs. The difficult thing in describing the issue of indigenous cultural contexts and the American library anywhere — in an unsupported, underused public library or the **University Library** here — is to avoid the suggestion of inferiority if certain values of American librarianship are not met. For that is the futile ground of colonialism against which all Pacific nations have worked against over the past several decades.

Yet, variants of colonialism remain — American to the north of the equator, British

against the grain people profile

Nicholas J. Goetzfridt

Professor of Library Science, Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Library, University of Guam <ngoetzfr@uog9.uog.edu>

BORN & LIVED: Born Virginia (a town) in northeastern Minnesota.

EARLY LIFE: Lived and went to school in Mountain Iron (Not Iron Mountain), Minnesota on the iron ore range of north eastern Minnesota with a probable goal of being a miner.

FAMILY: Married with two children.

EDUCATION: B.A. (English) **University of Minnesota-Duluth**, 1977; M.A. English (**University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee**) 1981; M.L.S. **University of Wisconsin-Madison**, 1986; Ph.D. **University of Wisconsin-Madison**, 1997.

FIRST JOB: Busboy at a restaurant in Virginia, Minnesota.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: University English teacher in Wisconsin 1979-1982, **University of the South Pacific** 1983-1985, librarian and eventually professor at the **University of Guam, RFK Memorial Library** 1987 to present.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO: Walk on treadmill or outside, weather and heat permitting, watch movies, play with kids.

FAVORITE BOOKS: *Blood Meridian* - **Cormac McCarthy**, *Steppenwolf* - **Hermann Hesse**; *In Patagonia* - **Bruce Chatwin**, *To Kill a Mockingbird* - **Harper Lee**.

PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD: Racism, greed.

PHILOSOPHY: Death is inevitable so make the part before it count.

MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Achieving humility and perspective in the midst of achievement.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: Other than publish two books in progress, uncertain.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS:

Somewhat the same as it is now — an intermixing of electronic and print with still a somewhat awestruck perspective toward technology with the library perhaps placed again on its death bed. Electronic readers will try again to upset the market but a large shipments of books will come into the local **Barnes and Noble** store along with a new flavored latte selection.

and French to the south. Hegemony takes on a life and a reality of its own with varying degrees of success and re-adaptation by islanders. Yet many Pacific islanders have, of course, benefited from these structures, using them for their own power and economic struggles like Americans elsewhere. They are also beset in an additional mode of complexity through the conflicts that indigenous communal heritages, oral forms of communication and knowledge and Western standards and influences have wrought. There is no standard to be met, remember, except for those engaged in these processes and the communal environments to which they usually return.

I bring all of this up in mentioning the **RFK Library's** new lease on life for collection development because of this contested context of information that in the epistemological relevance in Micronesian lives is far more likely to be *printed* between the covers of heritage and history and *read* within a resulting social protocol than between the covers of a "book." Again, acculturation to

American influence is strong in various ways and probably more pronounced on the island of Guam than anywhere else in the Western Pacific. Students attend college within a hegemonic and culturally negotiated kaleidoscope of perspectives, expectations, and desires. They learn and they do well for themselves and others. Meanwhile, cultural support systems crack under the strain of adaptation and the search for or the protection of identities. All the while sennits of history and the views of the world that languages and communal values provide remain like enabling vestiges of the past. I wish **Elfreda** had come here. 🌿

Endnotes

1. Nicholas Goetzfridt. "Micronesian Library Service." *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*. New York: Marcel Dekker, 2000. Volume 66, Supplement 29. p. 220.