

A Vanishing Breed? 4-11-74

Most of us, we believe, have mixed emotions when we read about the traditional leaders conference now taking place in Ponape.

In a way, it seems all very sad that a culture, a way of life for centuries, is in the process of dying out, a trend that seems irreversible to us.

On the other hand, those of us imbued since childhood in the ways of democracy, probably are grateful that the last vestiges of "power by inheritance" seems to be slipping slowly into the past.

For thousands of years the island chiefs have ruled their people with an iron hand, at least until the coming of the white man. Even then most of the colonialists, the Spanish, the French, the British, the Germans, the Americans, and even the Japanese used the power of the chiefs to get things done. But it was true, that the day of the real power, the power of life and death, the power of land and wealth, ended the day that westerners arrived, carrying guns.

The erosion of that traditional role, the chief, has accelerated in recent years as more and more young people became educated in Western ways. Thousands have visited other lands, and additional thousands have attended school on Guam. They have seen that in other, more "modern" places, that the leaders are chosen by the people. They are chosen on the basis, presumably, of their real worth, for their talent, for their efforts on behalf of the people, rather than having this leadership passed on from father to son. We've always felt that heredity is a poor instrument to pass along leadership, strength, or even intelligence. Nature doesn't necessarily work that way.

The days of royalty—which in essence is what the traditional leadership is—seems to be passing from the entire earth. Oh, there are still many examples of royalty in the world, in Great Britain, for instance, or Denmark, or Sweden. There may even be a resurgence of royalty in Spain within the next few years. But, by and large, royalty has been relegated to largely ceremonial duties. It has become a culture symbol, a tourist gimmick.

In Greece the King was overthrown not many years ago, as was Farouk in Egypt. There are only a few places in the world, mostly in the Arabic lands, that the traditional leaders still retain few power.

We're not talking about only the Western world, either. Japan, China, India, Indonesia, and throughout the Pacific, the tides have changed since the French revolution started the whole thing. The only kingdom remaining in this part of the world is Tonga, and even there some dissidents are beginning to make noises. Samoa, however, still is strong in the chief tradition.

Believe us, we're not in any way knocking the traditional leaders role in the Pacific. It served the island needs well for countless generations, and perhaps, still could do so. We've always felt that one of the God given rights of a people is for them to choose what ever form of government, or leadership that suits them best. It may be that the people of the islands, as they finally shuck themselves loose from the last vestiges of colonial rule, will revert back to their traditional leadership.

We still recall a statement made a few years back by a Palauan. He said that in the olden days all of the people on Palau lived peacefully, and got along with each other. Then came the American two party system, and now the people fight all the time. He could be right.

Island people still respect their traditional leaders, and this is to their credit. Generally, too, the leaders pass on all of their knowledge and skills to the next in line, from childhood on, thus training and insuring perpetual leadership—again, not a bad custom.

No, the traditional leaders may see their authority eroding. They may have to fight off the inroads of the rest of the world in these days of jet travel and instantaneous communications, but we suspect that they will be with us for some time to come. It all goes to point out that the world is changing, always, and now it seems to be changing at an ever accelerating pace. JCM.