

Lessons from Melanesia

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ABSTRACT Given increasing concerns about the future of "civilization," people wonder about how best to live. Cross cultural experiences offer valuable insights into alternative modes of living. The author describes life on Tanna, Vanuatu in the South Pacific and points out several key concepts gained from field work, including self-subsistence, individualism balanced with collectivism, limited cooperation with the powers that be, distribution and exchange mechanisms, balance, conflict resolution, and environmental fit. These ideas and concepts may be useful in considerations about restructuring social patterns in other cultures.

INTRODUCTION

As we members of an increasingly global society seek to build or at least preserve our valued traditions and ways of life in a time of unprecedented technological and social change, we may note rather perilous times coming. Overpopulation, environmental destruction, threats of war, and numerous other unsolved problems, loom, like giant barriers to continued "progress." Preservation of what has already been achieved may well have to give way to adaptation to lesser valued options, for the changes coming are likely to be multiple and diverse.

Given the dilemmas and difficulties of the present and future, we can expect chaos and greater disunity, and as a result, our fears for the future quite realistically grow. Thus it is almost inevitable that we should look to other times in history and other cultures for ideas and strategies to help us address perennial questions, fundamental concerns such as, "how should we live?" or "what is an ecologically sound human society?"

Every culture has experienced times of stability and times of change. By scanning accounts of these other cultures, we can undoubtedly turn up many worthwhile ideas that will enable us to reflect on our own society and understand it better, or to trigger thoughts about what we might do differently as we determine how best to live.

One approach to dealing with this question, is to look deeply at one other culture or culture area and make comparisons with one's own culture. Sometimes a contrasting point of view creates sufficient tension from the resulting cognitive dissonance to generate new ideas. Other times, having at least some similarity or cognitive consonance is important for facilitating effective transfers of knowledge from one society to another. Sometimes the similarities of ways to live may teach us that we are indeed on the right track. In every case, those with ecological understanding, anthropological training and/or cross-cultural experience are likely to be more able to provide helpful insights and observations to other members of their own society.

The Melanesian culture offers some excellent lessons for those raised in industrial or post-industrial or information-based societies. The author lived in Vanuatu (formerly the New Hebrides) for nearly one and a half years, after growing up in the United States. Variations in Melanesian cultures over time make generalizations less than totally valid, so the following discussion may not be exact, however the spirit of the argument is maintained. The particular locale was in a remote part of the island of Tanna (Gregory, 1993).

Through discussions, comparisons of observations made and participation engaged in overseas in the past, and reflection on the differences and similarities between other ways of life and alternatives, a number of ideas surfaced which may be of value. These lessons are described below.

LESSONS

One - Self Subsistence

In Melanesia, the power and pleasure of daily intimate contact with the land and environment through the medium of a garden is immense. Given a garden, a person or family become at

least reasonably self-subsistent. Such a base can be built upon for financial strength through raising and trading produce or through giving garden produce away to insure that others owe or are obligated to make returns in the less predictable future. Further, a sense of environmental and social harmony, security in one's own ability to wrest a living, results from this close interaction with the land.

Most Melanesians are gardeners, and their land is unusually rich in that fruit, vegetables, and resources for animals and building and exchange are readily available. With the skills and ability to grow sufficient food for every person, along with strongly held guardianship of the land, most Melanesians have the fundamentals of life readily available. The current stripping of Papua New Guinea and other island states by Japanese and Malaysian interests for timber is an imminent danger, however, sufficiently powerful that threats to this self-sufficiency do exist and must be recognized.

In the rest of the world, we could promote and grow gardens far more often than is currently the practice. Worries about lack of food, the chemical pollution of food, insufficient personal physical exercise, and financial concerns relating to purchase of food, could be dramatically reduced as problems. Perhaps as food bills increase, greater attention to gardening by more people might well occur. The many agricultural producers who now provide fresh food for the local or international markets would be free to pursue external markets, or to produce those items of food which families cannot produce in their own home gardens. But the first lesson is that a family garden enables people to be self-subsistent and therefore have self-esteem and pride and full stomachs and to be independent.

Two - Individualism can be Balanced with Collectivism

Melanesian subsistent farmers appear to be independent in terms of taking up work for others. They are very content as a rule when taking and retaining control over their own lives. As independent entrepreneurs, they represent small business people well. They would rather have their own "little boat," than accept passage, work on, or belong to a "big boat." They want full rights

to make decisions on all things that affect them, and they do not yield that right to others to make decisions for them or encroach on their territory.

Promoting small business has been a feature of recent governments elsewhere. Further encouragement of this process can be a powerful political platform for emerging new political parties. It is likely that many people will respond, for the dangers of both big government, and big business, are readily apparent. The corporate world may well rule, but with many small businesses and an entrepreneurial spirit available, the effects of corporate rule that is touted positively by big business and negatively by many others can be avoided.

Three - Limited Cooperation with the Powers-that-be

If Melanesians choose to cooperate, they do so for a specific project or period of time. Alliances are fragile and can easily shift or break over time, and depending upon the issue. Just because someone helps another on a task, this does not mean that similar help will automatically follow for another task or at another time. The issue of cooperation extends to representation as in government. Those who act on behalf of others, have such rights on temporary bases only. Melanesians use a "big man" approach to politics, rather than an elected representative government which persists and maintains power over time. That is, the preferred type of governance is temporary and short-term, not an on-going formal institution which soon becomes dominant and perpetual.

An increase in accountable government is a step in this direction. Thus, whether by design or default, some countries may be following these directions. Similarly, with contracts for services, those working for and with business and industry and government are also following these ideas. Changing vested interests and patterns is not easily accomplished, particularly in major and heavily institutionalized countries and political systems, but may be important to permit new and more workable patterns to emerge.

Four - Distribution and Exchange Mechanisms

Exchanges of goods, ideas, people, and resources are continuous, across fairly clear

boundaries between villages and even language groups throughout Melanesia. These exchanges include food, resources, and even people. They are typically marked by celebrations and rituals. Thus, a distribution system operates effectively and efficiently, so that individual Melanesians do not accrue vast amounts of wealth. Rather, the goods and resources of society are shared, traded, and given away in anticipation of future benefits for all.

One of the more intriguing economic experiments I have noted has been the "Green Dollar Exchange," a collective bartering mechanism for neighborhoods to trade goods and services with minimal fuss and bother. It might be fascinating to see if individual people could learn about, then engage in and support and further develop such exchanges, or at least not infringe on what these collective ventures are trying to accomplish. Taxes could easily destroy the initiation of such collective efforts, but thus far, at least a few governments have permitted these experiments to grow. Such exchanges are occurring in New Zealand, Great Britain, and the United States, and Europe. Where they will lead is unknown, but the efforts are intriguing and may hold promise of new ways of ensuring and promoting linkages within and between communities.

Another similar concept is that of intentional communities, in which sharing and joint ownership of property and resources enables all to benefit roughly equally. The extremes of wealth and accumulation are avoided, and therefore in theory at least, crime and violence may be reduced.

Five - Balance

The concept of balance is important in Melanesia, whether in matters of resources, size of villages, size of kinship groups, equality of exchanges and so on. The Melanesian framework appears to accept a condition of homeostasis, in which change is regarded as throwing previously existing balances into question. Social, political and economic mechanisms to maintain a balance are important, and are called into play frequently. Every proposed change, whether technological, social, or otherwise, is carefully debated as to its intended and unintended effects, and the debates often include ample discussion of who benefits and who does not benefit. When things are out

of balance, they recognize, then problems occur - whether sickness, natural disasters, or other momentous events.

Six - Conflict Resolution

Frequent meetings are held by village "big-men" to deal with conflicts and differences. The style of such meetings reveals a great deal of political experience, with rich ideas that could be adapted by others. For example, when members of disputing villages meet to discuss a problem, neutral parties are also invited to act as witnesses. At such disputes, speaking chiefs are able to gain stature, and penalties and punishments are awarded. Deals are sealed carefully, so that those who agree are bound, not only by their agreement, but also through memories of others in the invited tribal units. Penalties may escalate if offenses are repeated, thus the initial economic penalties and social disgrace may lead eventually to ostracism. When an agreement is reached, a ceremonial ritual takes place such that the deal is sealed, and people are able to get on with their lives and activities without further rancor. Restorative justice, rather than prisons enable people to be included, rather than excluded. Monitoring behavior as a form of social control is something the Melanesian cultures do well.

Seven - Tune in to and with the Environment

Over the centuries, Melanesians have lived in harmony with their environment. Concepts such as clear felling and mono-crops are rare or absent. They typically used their plants for subsistence, not as trade items to export. Now, unfortunately, exports are increasingly popular. Gardens were small scale, crop rotation was practised and plantings were typically diverse. Other types of maintaining harmony with the environment are also notable. For example, the people have evolved mechanisms such as living in the highlands rather than near the coast to escape mosquitoes.

Environmental imbalance is the case throughout much of the world and the consequences are immense. Study of the ways in which Melanesian cultures assure balance - crop rotation, establishing a taboo on land or fishing rights to preserve and protect, and ways to prevent the super-accumulation of wealth - could offer other

peoples ideas about their own practices and alternatives.

Eight - Alternatives are Possible

Maintaining memories are part of a collective life style, with songs and legends rather than writing used to retain the archival memory of what is important. Some features of Melanesian life are radically different from other ways in which people may live. Oral legends, with song and stories, serve as a library or way to remember lessons of the past. Writing things down is not the case. The ability to remember and retain information is remarkable. The important thing is that it works and the method contrasts sharply with other ways. Alternative ways to live, to record information, to "see" the world, are indeed possible.

Such fundamental practices as relying on written words are not essential, as the Melanesian case indicates. Some of the fundamental assumptions underpinning a culture or society can be re-examined to see if alternative practices are possible, for some may work. A case in point may be the possible reversion to use of paper and pencil if and when the computer systems of the world fail given the year 2000 dilemmas (Good, 1997).

Nine - Negatives can be Found in All Cultures

Traditionally, Melanesian male and female roles are rigid, superstition can be seen as due to a lack of the scientific method, and behavior towards chickens, butterflies, cats and other creatures may be strikingly different and repugnant to outside observers. Some elsewhere might see certain Melanesian practices as cruel and hurtful. Yet among the people I lived with, punishment of a child was a foreign concept, children were so well loved that they are literally not pun-

ished regardless of their actions. That someone should be hungry while others have plenty to eat was regarded as impossible, and explanations about hungry people in the midst of plenty were simply not understood and not believed. Such situations were regarded as intolerable, a striking difference from any major home or city street scene in most parts of the world. But of course, not all was positive about this culture either.

Every culture has problems or needs as well as assets. It is good to know and realize that no one way of life is without such issues. By becoming aware of the differences, it is more likely that cultures and people will be able to grow and "improve," by borrowing and adding other ideas. Sometimes when caught up in a given situation, people become less aware that alternative solutions are possible.

CONCLUSION

Searching for social, political, and economic alternatives through examination of other cultures is an important issue, for contrasts and questions stimulated by cross-cultural experiences can raise awareness, encourage full discussion, and lead to greater acceptance of best possible directions for the future. In this article, some issues from Melanesia, specifically an experience in Tanna, Vanuatu, have been explored and presented as valuable means in creating ideas for our times and our consideration.

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