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AN EYE FOR AN EAR The Reversal of Psychic Current in the Bicameral Culture of the Marianas

Bill Bingham
Northern Marianas College

The bicameral culture of the Marianas, a traditional balance of left-brain shamanic and right brain communal activities was short circuited during the Spanish colonial period, when a rudimentary literacy program initiated by the Spanish was blocked by their own refusal to allow Micronesians to read scripture. The literacy program initiated by the Americans in 1945 has been successful.

“Here too we discover a night and day as a condition of life for us. The desire for knowledge and the desire for desultory wandering are the ebb and flow. If one of them assumes complete control, it spells man’s demise.” – Nietzsche

I imagine the ancient Micronesian in this way - an amphibious being, a lone fisherman who spends half his life swimming and diving, is standing at dawn in front of a boundless horizon of sea and sky. Can all this vastness be fathomed? Or does every thought simply dissolve in the dream of this immensity? It seems he has two paths he can take. He can take the path of trying to understand the sea and the sky and the jungle around him. Or he can swim out into it—immerse himself—and dissolve in it. He can choose knowledge or he can choose the wonderful emptiness, the lucid dreaming of random, purposeless wandering. His mind is shaped for either path, but he cannot choose both—or at least he cannot have them both at the same time.

He can choose the shaman’s path. Or he can choose the communal life of the tribe. Both belong as different options of the culture, but they are opposite options. On one path he chooses the path of the single one, the individual, a difficult path that will require years of discipline and study under the guidance of a master. The other will be easy—nothing easier—sharing the unity, the communal life of the people of the islands.

We know these two paths existed primordially for the Micronesians because of traces of shamanism and of communal life that existed side by side for centuries before the Spanish conquest,¹ but also because neurologists, studying the bicameral nature of the brain over the last forty years, have established complementary but opposite functions of the left and the right hemispheres of the brain. One axiom generally accepted in this burgeoning study of mental functions is that a dynamic inter-relationship between left and right brain functions is healthy. To get stuck on one side or the other can bring obsession, distortion and pa-

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ralysis: lack of balance. We can see the history of Micronesian culture since the Spanish conquest as a problem in overcoming left brain paralysis.

Most of the society before the Spanish was right brain in its holistic, affective focus, as the culture continually re-established contact with the elemental. They were especially taken with the conviction that the meaning of an action, like planting or fishing or battle, and of life in general, was not simply a purpose it might achieve but a heightened intensity of life. Purpose or meaning was not the point of life, that feeling of unity and intensity that comes with the action itself was the point. There was a kind of low burning rapture in it.

Learning to use or manipulate the forces of nature grows from the grueling discipline of the shaman in preparing his students for their independent life in later years. In the shaman school, the students are committed to years of hard work in grasping the process.² This process could be compared to donning a head dress. Donning a head dress could be said to be a strategy to struggle with the emptiness. Civilization has severed all ties to the elemental, and has done so by means of disguise, of playing various roles. The role of the mask in the skill of the shaman is to enter into the elemental more deeply as in a journey, in order to learn to use and dominate it. One wears a tiger's mask in order the better to ride the tiger. The shaman has no desire to make everything clear and bright, a "clean, well lighted place" but rather to work with the mystery of nature: it is the enigmatic character of things he finds attractive.

Nonetheless he finds the use of linear steps and lists of tools to be necessary. This longing for enhancement and mystique grows along with the development of knowledge and power. He wants to tap the primal efficacy of the forces that have shaped boy into man, that inexplicable power somewhere in the world, that intellectually productive and shape-shifting force existing and being practiced and passed along in many different parts of the Pacific. If this power occurs two or three times in the course of a call from the shaman, and again

and again—that call is what enlightens the world.

Let us call the image of nature that the shaman envisioned Heraclitean: this is a world that is never still; it keeps on evolving. Evolving calls up struggle and conquest. The shaman builds his skill on the assumption that access to truth is actually access to power.

Since conflicts and battles of opposites are what is known as the Heraclitean "war", questions of truth are resolved when life forces are pitted one against another. The shaman starts from observation and uses it as a guide. For the shaman it is a far richer phenomenon and allows for more distinct conclusions than communal intuition. There are many eyes and thus many sources of power. Contingency is crucial. There is no overarching design, but only a dynamics of struggle, no final meaning, only self-enhancement. The shamanic process engages the left brain as a balance to the communal right brain.

On the other hand the antipodes of the right brain collective are sex and death, the begetting and the preserving after death of one unbroken line, as in the burial (under the house) of the bones and skulls of the ancestors. Here continuity is everything. A morality is established to maintain and preserve the integrity of this continuity, both in this life and after this life, underground. The unity of the culture is the crucial thing.³

When the Conquistadors come, they come with missionaries and they represent respectively the left and right sides of Spanish culture. The Conquistadors' Heraclitean universe is also based on conflict, on battle, on "war" and conquest, but unlike the shamans, whom they destroy, they have no tolerance for counter norms. Peoples, for them, come into contract with one another, collide, confiscate and destroy. Destruction culminating in conquest is the origin of all things. A battle of master and slave is being waged, and there is no possibility of synthesis. In the course of the conquest, the master might well have adopted something from the slave. They might well have learned something as the French and British did—but in the case of the Spanish, the fanatical desire for hegemony on the part of Madrid and the

Grand Inquisitorial obsession of the missionaries, does not allow for synthesis, or incorporation. Only a merciless, almost mindless cultural genocide results.

The missionaries in seminary went through a discipline similar to the shamanic students in *process* (though not in *content*, of course), left brain but focused on the struggle to incorporate a written text into their lives and impose that text on them. A knowledge of alphabet and reading was therefore essential. But they do not bring this left brain focus on individual understanding of a text into their conversion of the Micronesians. Micronesians are to *hear* the word, but not to *read*. To *hear* the word means they remain in their right brain, a passive collectivity. They cannot integrate the meaning of the text in its left brain linear detail. They can only accept the faith in the way they accepted their earlier religion, through the *ear*, not the *eye*. And the Conquistadors prefer, *require* this distance from the text.

It was certainly not in the interest of Conquistadors to encourage intellectual development, left brain evolution, at anytime in its 300 years colonization period. They regarded both hemispheres of the culture they first encountered - the left brain shamanic and the right brain intuitive - as blindness. And indeed the intuitions of the right hemisphere resemble *facial vision* - a sort of sixth sense that blind people develop to perceive objects and landscapes, as it were, through sound shadows, rather like a bat's echo location. Right brain cultures are rather like blind young warriors who are able to run about fearlessly without worrying about hurting themselves, the more acute their 'facial vision' tends to be.

Since there is no synthesis to silence the battle of the antitheses, Conquistadorial history is a history of contradictions that cannot be reconciled, but must be fought out until there are only masters and slaves. So a movement of the people as a whole to the process of seeing, of reading, of left brain individuality, tragically does not occur. There are exceptions, of course, but only for the sake of a local seminarian or a brilliant local nun.

The Conquistadorial logic is this: the side I take is good *because* I am master and my people

are also. Us and Them - that is the essential distinction. It is a distinction the missionaries are at pains to transcend, and in the case of authentic converts, do transcend. But the Conquistadors see even converts in the traditional Spanish way as *Conversos*: fake. They cannot be trusted, anymore than the Jews who convert in Spain can be trusted. It is always Us vs. Them.

For Micronesians themselves, it is only a matter of clarifying the boundaries of the "us", which continually shift because there are always people who betray their blood ties. Gradually, more and more people become authentic converts. But it is not permitted the people as a whole even to *touch* the Sacred Book, much less to look within at the indecipherable sacred hieroglyphics.

The Missionaries, under the long shadow of the Inquisition, were satisfied with this "us" of the right brain for the people they have come to serve, knowing what "interpretation" has done to Christianity in Europe in the Wake of the Reformation. They conclude it is just as well that natives do not gain the literacy, the understanding of background and reading necessary to "interpret." Better, perhaps, to maintain and preserve their unity, which the missionaries would call love.

Just as the shamen retained the fluidity to utilize right brain intuition in their primitive analyses of nature, so the Micronesian community as a whole always maintained left-brain orality. "However the left-brain speech centers never completely eliminated the influence that the older right brain has on both the creation and comprehension of oral language. If the spoken word was the result of delicately balanced assignments of the left and right brain then the invention of writing completely upset this balance..." says Shlain, ... "Throughout history the group that arms itself with a book will generally annihilate the group that depends on oral teachings."⁴

There were schools, of course, like the College of San Juan de Letran in Agana,⁵ where catechism, prayers, litanies, rosaries, the explanation of Christian doctrine were central,⁶ and a rudimentary sort of learning in Spanish letters, reading and writing went on - Father Procurator General found the necessary books

for reading and papers and ink to learn to write.⁷ There were some small books made available, but the *One Book* that might have motivated all to read – either in Latin or Spanish – was forbidden. So the culture hearing at Sunday mass what *could not ever* be read, remained an oral, right brain culture.

And how did they interpret the priesthood of this left brain literacy? They heard stories of European conflict over various passages of the text, even wars over the meaning of words, wars that lasted three hundred years. As a student of mine told me, her auntie had told her not to read the Bible: “*It will only drive you crazy*”. Spanish Catholicism tended to be logocentric for the elite, leaving the masses to hear the word rather than to read it. The elite’s attitude may well have been: “*It will only drive you crazy*.” So it was not in the interest of the Spanish, with their obsessions with political hegemony and religious conformism, to encourage any learning.

Left brain “hearing” of logos can be initially enlivening, even liberating, to a people whose culture has always been oral, but without background knowledge, reading skill, it can be limiting. The initial move toward the left gets stuck. It goes back into a right brain solidarity that sees the mania of their masters as vicious “buffoonery.” They remain unified in a submission that is superficial, close to lip service. If their old roots are afflicted by casting suspicion on the solace offered to nature, dancing, music, and the closeness to nature, then their greatest source of vitality and humanity is impoverished, and they fall back into a lassitude that is endless.

With the coming of the Germans in 1880 and Americans to Guam in 1900 and to Saipan in 1945, the change was electrifying. The American educational system emphasized individuality, the alphabet and literacy.⁸ Suddenly the right brain was challenged, and the old communal tenets were questioned. Six hundred Peace Corps Volunteers brought a literacy revolution and a pragmatic, if romantic attitude toward the Pacific, a relativism and tolerance that was new to Micronesians, who had only known will-to-power and master-slave relations for over 300 years.

But left brain intellectuality was not the only force in American culture. The Americans also brought a full counterforce of the right brain influences: rock music, drugs and television. Watching television required an entirely different mental strategy from that used in reading. Both reading and writing are solitary endeavors. Television abruptly reversed the process: it not only re-connected individual families but also began to reware the whole human community into what McLuhan called “one vast electronic global village”. We now see a kind of inner dynamic between left and right brain return to re-establish the bicameral culture of the Marianas.

In addition to the alphabet and literacy, left brain development brought increasing appreciation of linear time (“no more rubber time” as the saying goes here) stretching back into the past and projecting into the future. Pondering personal longevity, left brain people are always trying to speed things up so as to escape death. I have seen Saipan speed up by multiples in the last 12 years alone. Micronesians introduced to left brain functions came to understand, as they slip on their first watch, that each person will experience death personally, inevitably, and with a finality that allows no escape, and has no alternatives. The war is won; no one here still refuses to wear a watch.

Once the implication of this dark thought sinks in, the oceanic boundlessness of right brain dreaming becomes sorely missed. A disquieting anxiety begins to grow. Then the dark and ancient right brain laughter rises to engulf the panic: “We’re running out of time.”

So the movement from the right brain unity and harmony, music and dance, to the stress of the left brain dualism (before and after) is a very difficult passage. That is what people are facing here now. In the right brain there is the confidence that the souls live on, and this confidence assists the Micronesians’ established rituals to aid the souls transmigration to the next realm. Archaeologists have excavated reverential burials dating back hundreds of years on the islands, and funerary rites are defining characteristics of the islanders’ culture.⁹ When everyone owns a computer, a slide rule, a fast

truck and watch, death will be seen to be gaining in the rearview mirror.

The right brain is focused on the feminine principle, the age of the goddess, for one reason because men grasp the woman's role in their own personal immortality- the birth process. The earth is both womb and tomb. As the left brain ticks off the male's inevitable demise, the right brain rejoices in the females' indispensable role in bringing forth children. These two towering insights, the left brain sense of death and the right brain celebration of sex and regeneration, now intersects on the *corpus callosum* of the two brains. Leonard Shlain suggests:

"When human males realized that they could achieve a kind of immortality only through their heirs, they imposed a menarche-to-menopause tyranny over females. Much of what is vigorously debated in our culture right up to the present has its roots in the archaic dichotomy between males/ death (left brain) and female/ life right brain" ¹⁰

Recent discoveries suggest that the male mind tends to objectify itself often through antagonism, in the left side of the brain, while the female finds consensus in the more cordial right brain. We can see now that to rob males of their full rights to the left brain was a way for the Spanish to keep them enslaved, castrated, as it were.

Robert Logan, the author of *The Alphabet Effect*, suggested: "A medium of communication is not merely a passive conduit for the transmission of information but rather an active force in creating new social patterns and new perceptual realities. A person who is literate has a different world view than one who receives information through oral communication". ¹¹ The Micronesian believers only *heard* what others *read*. Someone attending Mass and hearing the sonorous word chanted, sung and recited is having a very different experience from someone who reads a text revealing the origins of the ritual. It may be that on a certain level the right brain experience is the more profound, but why deny the participant the full bicameral experience, both hearing and reflecting on what he reads?

The EEG brain wave patterns of someone reading a book are very different from those of

the same person at Mass, or watching television. Watching television and meditating generate the identical slow alpha and theta waves. These EGG patterns decode a serene, receptive and contemplative state of mind. Reading on the contrary generates beta waves, the kind that appear wherever a person is focusing on a left brain activity. ¹²

Corroborating evidence concerning the experienced differences between those two modes comes from PET scanners (position emission tomography) that demonstrate the circuits in the left brain lighting up when a person is reading (while the right hemisphere remains relatively dark). When a person looks up from his book and begins to watch television the right brain turns on and the left begins to fade. ¹³ Books disseminate written words. Television projects images. As television sets continue to proliferate around the Marianas, they are re-directing the course of evolution also. They do not block left brain literacy or reflection, but they do slow it down. Crossing the bridge of the *corpus callosum* in both directions, the mind may be looking for some ancient balance.

The fusing of photography and electromagnetism is proving to be as significant as the dissemination of writing and print here in the late 1940s. While most commentators focus on the *content* of TV, and lock into the buffoonery, they fail to see that the *process* of watching television itself is reconfiguring the Micronesian mind in both positive and negative ways. If it balances the process of left brain reading and thinking, it may be healthy. If it retards the further development of literacy toward introspection and generalization, that could be a disaster. We give far too much attention to a medium's content. It is far more important how the medium itself affects people's perception of reality. We need *both* thinking and meditation, reading and contemplation, introspection *and* random purposeless wandering.

Language is our fate. Which house of words a child enters will determine how he or she thinks. An important factor affecting a culture's historical development is the ability to grasp the concept of the individual. The reductionist, solitary and alienating aspects of read-

ing have encouraged users to see themselves apart from nature, their deity, their government, and each other.¹⁴

In contrast, the pattern recognition inherent in an oral language like Chamorro has enmeshed them in a web of interpersonal relationships. The patterns in oral languages have kept Micronesians bound to their institutions—family, church, village, - not separate from them. Oral language in the right brain can shield speakers from the *angst* that arises with a separate individual, but it may also straitjacket them in a community stifled by *respect*, customs and manners.

As it turns out, the opposing if complementary functions of mind are instinctive. Just as in a marriage in which masculine and feminine are balancing each other as on a tightrope, so too it is as if the mind were constantly re-adjusting and compensating for psychological deficiencies. If both sides of the brain are not fed and nurtured—as in the Spanish period in the Marianas—neurosis results. It is not surprising whatsoever that the Micronesian, denied literacy, showed signs of missing it, like someone who has lost his arms—his phantom hands itch and twitch ceaselessly.

Now after fifty years of literacy and forty years of television, they may feel caged in school, they may miss their old wildness but they have begun to make connections. They are, I suspect, given to a profound skepticism regarding hunter/killer left brain knowledge. They see the connection between the will to truth and the will to power in the Conquistadors, the Japanese Kamakazi and the invading American warrior culture advancing on Suicide Cliff. They have begun to make connections. They see that the side of the brain that led them to the brink of extinction 300 years ago may someday lead the world to the same fate. But they have made the vital connections across the *corpus collosum* uniting the two hemispheres. They know, in hints and guesses, the secret of the named and the nameless, the bound and the boundless, the Micronesian on the beach and the sea at his feet.

*I was alone upon the seashore...I felt that
I...returned from the solitude of individuation into*

*the consciousness of unity with all that is... Earth,
heaven and sea resounded as in a vast world-
encircling harmony ...I felt myself one with them.* ¹⁵

I suggest that an experience like this one, described by the German philosopher Malevina von Meysenburg in 1900, was within the reach of Micronesians before the left brain literacy revolution of the 1950s and 60s. And is it at risk in this coming century, apt to be swept aside in the current of technological and verbal compulsion? But then the laughter rises and crests, like a great wave. It is a chess game, “simple and elegant” as a chess master might say of each corresponding move on the board.

ENDNOTES

- [1] Lawrence J. Cunningham, *Ancient Chamorro Society*, Honolulu Bess. Press, 1992, 97-98 calls the Micronesian shaman an individual who has the job of guiding and enhancing the religious practices of others... “A *Shaman* is a religious leader who has special abilities to influence supernatural power for his clients. He or she is a person who acquired his or her religious power through individual initiative. Frequently shamans isolate themselves for a while in an attempt to have the supernatural powers reveal themselves to them. In doing so they are given special gifts such as the power to heal or make people sick; or the power to control the weather or see the future; and/or the power to deal with spirits...where as priest and priestess work for the supernatural and tell people what to do, the shaman works on behalf of his clients and tries to tell the supernatural what to do”.
- [2] *Ibid.*, p. 100 “The ancient Chamorro believed that a person’s character depended on the strength of his soul or spirit. Some people’s spirits were thought to be weak. This was the reason they were lazy or cowardly. Those who were great warriors and hard workers had strong souls. Their souls could overcome the negative force of an *aniti* (ancestral spirit)”.
- [3] Paul Carano and Pedro Sanchez, *A History of Guam*, Tokyo, Charles Tuttle, Co, 1964 p.109. Shortly after he assumed office in 1771, Agana’s Governor Tobias established two free public schools, where the children of the town were taught reading, writing and arithmetic, as well as vocal and instrumental music. The schools were separate: one for boys and one

for girls. But these schools had a very limited enrollment and many problems.

- [4] Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet vs. The Goddess*, NY, Penguin, 1994, 42, 241
- [5] *History of Micronesia*, volume 9, ed by Rodrigue Levesque, p. 264, the Rector of the Colegio de Juan Letran writes to the Father Procurator General Antonio Xaramello, May 17, 1689: "If the College for Girls be preserved (indeed it is of much fruit if properly run), precautions should be taken so that the girls who might be raised therein will not be at risk with the soldiers. Said College was first set up in 1674, and same year it had to be removed because of those camps were bothering them too much. The Ven. Father Manuel de Solorzano reopened it, and, as there was more vigilance on the part of the Governor, who was then the Master-of-camp, Don Antonio de Savaria, nothing untoward was heard against the decorum of said College. However, given that not everyone is of the caliber of said Master-of-camp, Y.R. will please try and get a criminal law from there to benefit said College, with a clear penalty against delinquent, and an order that it be rigorously applied. There should come another order (unless one could be got through our people in Manila) to the effect that from the Philippines should be sent two, or three prominent Indian ladies of good age, life and customs that are known to be exemplary; they should have a good skill, such as required for the upbringing and education of these girls, to take over the management of this college. Enough money for honorable stipends, clothing and food allowance, should be specified for them within 2000 pesos (unless other alm be available for this purpose). If instead of two, or three prominent ladies, there be one or two families, honorable as well, with the husband having a good penmanship and being a musician, and his wife with the required skills, it would be better, because the husband could look after the boys and his wife after the girls, leaving the overall supervision of both Colleges in the hands of the Father who is assigned this task by his Rector".
- [6] Ibid. In a letter from Petrus Comano S.J. to Fr. Norveslus Van Coukesken 1680, quoted in *History of Micronesia*, page 584-585: "The administration of the Indians is accomplished almost (always) in the following manner. Everyday the children of either sex, young ones and teenage boys and girls, convene for catechism school. While the sacred office of the

Mass is being performed they sing the usual songs of the Christian doctrines, to be followed by an instruction into the mysteries of our faith, about which they respond when questioned. Those who answer well are praised, and even rewarded. Those who answer badly suffer their ready punishment: all those who are advanced in the doctrine and in Christian custom are caned. These schools are repeated towards evening, when even the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin is recited by alternating groups. Once a week they all come together and, after they have been taught thoroughly how to sing the Christian doctrine, in the local manner, first one part at a time, and when that is done reasonably well, then altogether. A roll is always solemnly called, looking for any absent ones, who would be convicted of negligence in this case. They purge their sentence by receiving the whip in accordance with the gravity of the crime, for that is the nature of the Indians in these parts according to proven experience, that is, unless a punishment is applied, they would not do their duty. For this purpose are designated people, called "controllers" here, one in each colony and three or four controllers in the main ones, who stand out from everyone in their virtue and conduct in their Christian duty."

- [7] Ibid, in a short biography of Fr. San Basilio by Fr. Gayoso, 1674 volume 6 *History of Micronesia* p. 339, Gayoso is quoted. "When the Fathers saw the fruit specially in the youth, they were carried on their fervent zeal and went out at night to look for boys and girls, even taking them from the houses of their parents to bring them to the Colleges, so that they would be well trained in the things concerning our holy faith. However, this method was violent, and with it, on account of the excess of zeal by a few, its disadvantages were also felt. The Indians took it badly, that the Fathers would enter their houses at night and take away their sons, and daughters, forcibly from their very sides, and beds. That is why the Indians from a certain town came and complained bitterly to Father Gerardo. Therefore, the Father became undeceived, and he ordered the Fathers not to go out at night for that purpose, and to apply more moderation and prudence in the recruitment of boys and girls."
- [8] Don Farrell, *History of the Marianas*, CNMI, PSS Press, 1991 p. 556-557. Between 1945-1960, the U.N created Trust Territory Agree-

ment mandated the people of Micronesia to govern themselves, but the biggest concern of the Americans was the fact that there were not enough *educated* people to actually run a government. Farrell describes the coming of the Peace Corps in September 1961 as a move to develop literacy in Saipan. Dr. William V. Vitarelli, assistant director of education for TTPI, traveled to Washington, DC to meet with the leaders of the Peace Corps. He recommended 46 volunteers for education. The Peace Corps later decided on approximately 600 volunteers for the region. The Peace Corp prepared a pamphlet entitled *The Peace Corps Goes to Paradise*. It began: “Tropical Islands, Enchanted Evenings, Swaying Palms and Sun Kissed Maiden...” In a two weeks period, more than 3,000 young Americans volunteered for service in the Trust Territory. The Peace Corps had a far-reaching effect on the Trust Territory.

- [9] Lawrence J. Cunningham, *Ancient Chamorro Society*, 97-100
- [10] Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet vs. the Goddess*, NY, Penguin, 1998 p.30
- [11] Robert Logan, *The Alphabet Effect*, NY, William Morrow, 1986 p. 24
- [12] Shlain, 408
- [13] Ibid, 408
- [14] Ibid, 408
- [15] Quoted in “*Religion and Brain*”, Newsweek, May 7, 2001. The resistance to reading a book still remains today, and the roots of that reluctance—‘you could go crazy’—have to do with their first impressions of the white man, how cruel they look, their eyes sharp, with a staring antagonism, always seeking something, always anxious and restless, always fleeing boredom, thinking with their heads and not their hearts. Better that long drowsy afternoon on the beach and the communal hum that still mesmerizes: oblivion blooms.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY AND CONTACT

Dr. Bill Bingham teaches literature and speech communications at the College of the Northern Marianas.

Dr. Bill Bingham, Northern Marianas College, P.O. Box 501250, Saipan, MP 96950. United States of America