NANYANG JUNIOR COLLEGE

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GENERAL PAPER 8807/2

PAPER 2: 31 August 2016

INSERT **1 hour 30 minutes**

READ THIS INSTRUCTION FIRST

This insert contains the passage for Paper 2.

This insert consists of **3** printed pages including the cover page.

Francis Hezel writes about the impact of globalisation on cultural change.

1 How often have you heard someone remark in woeful tones, "How sad that Micronesians are losing their culture?" The complaint is even more poignant when it comes from one who is an Islander. Fear of loss of culture, the occasion of much fretful discussion over the past two or three decades, still seems to be very much a live issue today. Perhaps the talk of globalisation, fuelled by the awareness of an already changed cultural landscape, is responsible for the recent wave of concern. In any case, the laments are still forthcoming from the Micronesians with a slight tremor in their voice and a pained look in their eyes.

2 Culture change is upon us, many fear, like a tsunami advancing rapidly to the shore threatening to engulf whole populations, erasing them and all memory of what they once held dear. Once the wave washes over the island and retreats again, all we can expect to find is the debris of what formerly had been a living and vibrant culture. The assumption here is that a people can endure only so much change, just as waves can beat against a building for only so long and with only such an intensity before the entire building collapses. At some point at the height of the storm, the waves will topple the edifice just as the impact of cultural change topples the culture. If the force of the cultural change persists, the culture is doomed.

3 The watchword, then, is cultural preservation: keeping a close lookout for whatever might imperil the culture, eradicating anything that threatens to suffocate those cultural forms we know as customs, employing the same measures we have learned to take to preserve our wildlife. It is imperative that we do so with redoubled diligence since failure would result in us losing not just some form of life symbolic of the culture, but the culture itself. Therefore, we man the watchtowers and keep a vigilant eye out for massive change–that last attacking force that will overwhelm the citadel, or the final towering wave that will wash away the remainder of our culture.

4 Although the human reaction is understandable, the model upon which it is based is apocryphal in the extreme. If the flood is already upon us, what response can we make other than to stoically await the end? Cultural change in Micronesia has been occurring for centuries, but never more intensely than during the past fifty years. The waves have long since started washing over these islands, and there is no indication that the storm will abate in this present era of globalisation. We can expect much more of the same in the years ahead. Under these conditions, it would appear that our cultures are doomed.

5 Yet, cultures manage to survive for hundreds of years despite the many mutations they have undergone. A striking example of this is Japanese culture. What does life in urban Tokyo today, with men and women in Western business dress commuting to work by subway or bullet train, have in common with the days of the sworded samurai and the masters they served? Not much, on the surface of it all. Yet they are all Japanese, even a young one with spiked purple hair who sleeps on a park bench when he is not skateboarding. Could it be due to a spirit that could be called Japanese, however difficult it may be to articulate the features of this spirit? Is it in the formal courtesy that Japanese pay to those with whom they deal? Is it related to the sparseness of Japanese decor, the preference for focusing on a single detail and somehow finding all of life embodied in one leaf or one blossom? None of these really comes close to summing up what it means to be a Japanese, of course. Yet it does suggest that there may be a combination of distinctive features that goes into the making of a Japanese. Not all these features can be articulated, not all of them are even discernible, and certainly not all of them are to be found in each individual from that culture. But there is an imprint of how life is meant to be lived that is passed down from one generation to the next–not through the DNA, but through the social environment with its hundreds of personal interactions, each exemplifying in some way how people ought to conduct themselves.

6 The identity of any culture rests on much more than the similarity between the lifestyle of a people and their descendants three hundred years later. It lies in the continuity of the culture transmitted, inasmuch as this pattern of life has been handed down from one generation to another for that entire period. Naturally it has evolved, perhaps very substantially, but its sameness is rooted in the people this design for living serves. This sense of continuity over the centuries, nourished by a remembrance of their past, provides a people with a sense of cultural identity. A distinctive language helps nourish this sense of identity, but it is not an essential feature of cultural identity.

7 If we have assumed that culture is the sum total of the products of a people, we may have been focusing too exclusively on preservation of customs and the external features of that culture in our efforts to ensure cultural survival. Yet, culture is not just a display of exotic artefacts–feathered headdresses, shell belts, and stone pounders–to be displayed in the showcase of a museum. It is the pattern of life, the design for community living, that is found in a real people as they exist today. As long as these people survive, their culture is alive and well. How could any people possibly exist in a cultureless void, after all?

8 This rhetoric has led to suggestions that perhaps our emphasis on cultural survival is misplaced. Instead of guarding the ramparts against breaches of culture, we should be encouraging adaptation as a means of survival. The key to cultural survival, then, is not purely conservatism–hanging on tightly to all that we have received in the past–but a genuine sense of dynamism and a readiness to adapt to a changing world. Therefore, some of what we have understood in the past as either-or dichotomies ought to be re-examined in the light of this new model of culture.

9 This is not to say that cultural adaptation should be the be-all and end-all and cultural preservation should be dropped from the agenda. We ought to be wary about discarding features of the culture on the grounds that they are outmoded and useless. Often these features, or the spirit behind them, prove to be just what is needed in facing up to modernity. But some changes are necessary, even inevitable. We should not be afraid to adopt and adapt.

10 Consider Guam. If the island culture of Guam has not been swallowed whole over 300 years of colonial rule and during the intensive modernisation over the past fifty years, what are the chances that the dreaded globalisation is going to be able to do so? Perhaps about the same as the probability that Italy will look and smell and sound just like Germany after a given number of years of shared membership in the European Union. The widely shared fear throughout the world that globalisation will extract the exotic taste from all cultures so that peoples will be blended into the same bland batch of cultural dough is groundless. There are certainly legitimate concerns about globalisation, but this hardly seems one of them.

11 Over the years, cultural uniqueness will inevitably burst out in many ways, even in countries that complain of being saturated with westernisation. TV soap operas may be an American invention, but Japanese or Filipino or Latin American soap operas are clearly stamped with their own unique style. McDonald's serves up burgers in many countries around the world, but the menu reflects the subtle difference in taste from one place to the next. In Micronesia, the nose flute has given way to the guitar and lately to the keyboard, but the music today still reflects a distinctive island sound. The cultural genius of a people will not be denied.