MICRONESIAN WORLD WAR II SONGS AND CHANTS
Serving a Variety of Functions

Tammy Duchesne
Guam

While song in Micronesia may not yet have received a substantial amount of attention, preliminary investigations indicate that the writing and performing of WWII songs served many functions for Micronesians. These songs were a vehicle for storytelling, served as a recording of collective memory, provided humor, entertainment, and distraction, offered therapeutic or healing functions, functioned as a form of resistance, provided a sense of group identity, and served as mnemonic devices. The WWII songs of Micronesians served many purposes during the war and now, over 60 years after the end of WWII, that songs are still being sung and transmitted is a testimony to the value and importance of these songs in Micronesian cultures and societies.

Many historians would agree that World War II was one of the most significant, important, and change-producing events to ever occur in the Pacific region. The events and changes that took place during the Japanese occupation were noteworthy but the duration of their occupation, the war years from 1941-1945, are the years that will never be forgotten. World War II forced people to submit to foreign domination, relocate off of their ancestral lands, participate in coerced labor, and suffer food shortages. Micronesians watched as their lands were robbed, suffered as their crops were stolen, and watched as their landscapes and food patches were ruined. Many islanders were separated from their loved ones, while some were tortured, and others were killed, whether accidentally during bombings or intentionally through brutal methods. WWII made an immense impact on virtually all the Micronesian islands. While many of the Micronesians who were alive to witness World War II have passed on, some of their memories have been recorded and preserved. Death may have claimed their lives, but it did not claim their history, memories, or feelings. In response to the horrors and atrocities brought about by WWII, many islanders across Micronesia and the Pacific composed songs about their lives, experiences, and memories during occupation and the war years. The memories, emotions, events, reactions, and feelings of the war-affected Micronesians have not faded like many of the photographs or paper documents of their American and Japanese war-waging counterparts. The voice and collective memory of World War II has been preserved through their songs; these songs have served and continue to serve many functions for both Micronesians and researchers who want to gain insight into the Micronesian WWII experience.

THE ROLE OF SONG IN MICRONESIA
Compared to Melanesians and Polynesians, native Micronesians have not flocked to the
written medium as of late. As Donald Rubinstein notes, “compared with the outpouring of South Pacific literature over the past three decades—in the form of novels, short stories, plays and poetry—the published literature from the northern Pacific Islands is remarkably scarce” (Rubinstein, 2000, p. 1). Yet while the voice and commentaries of the Micronesians may be conspicuously absent from the written world, it would be remiss to ignore the contributions made by Micronesians through oral traditions. Indeed Rubinstein cautions, “viewing Pacific Islands literature solely from the vantage of published English language works, however, obscures a great deal of oral literature or ‘orature—creations in the oral form’ which figures importantly in continuing cultural traditions in the Pacific Islands” (Ibid., p. 1). It must be realized that privileging written texts, or giving them more recognition and respect than oral traditions, is problematic as this educational, cultural, and economic bias excludes some very important, information-laden historical accounts.

To date, the vast majority of Micronesian histories have been written by foreign or non-Micronesian authors. Most of these published accounts document the important events in the colonial periods of the islands but very few focus on the day to day lives or activities of the islanders. With limited written texts and published accounts focusing on the lives and histories of Micronesians to serve as firsthand historical documents, scholars of Micronesian history must rely on other sources. While Micronesians have not often documented or transcribed their stories, beliefs, myths, folklore, chants, songs, or histories in written form, they have always valued the oral preservation, transmission, and maintenance of their traditions. Considering the high respect ascribed to the keepers of the knowledge, those with this charge take their responsibilities and duties seriously and remember in detail every word and phrase. In addition to dutifully remembering the content and the specific manner for relating the account, people frequently also remember the specifics behind each song’s composer and the circumstances behind each song’s composition. Because oral traditions are so respected and taken so seriously as Micronesian form of history, to date the most valuable, pertinent, and authentic material will not be found in written texts. To understand and extract the indigenous history of Micronesians one needs to watch, listen, observe, and absorb: “students of Micronesian literature may very likely encounter more culturally valued ‘texts’ transmitted through dance and song performance in vernacular languages and highly localized events than transcribed or preserved in the pages of literary journals or circulating in foreign press publications” (Ibid., p. 1). Rubinstein was not the only one who recognized that Micronesian history is often performative. Geoff White also asserted, “Pacific Islanders enact and represent their history in dance, song, and in dramatic skits (and often all three at once)” (White 1999).

Indeed, to gain an understanding of the Micronesian WWII experience, one should explore and delve into the information, stories, and emotions contained in Micronesian WWII songs.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION, OPEN AND CLOSED TOPICS
While the oral or performative aspect of Micronesian history makes it very interesting, the cultural attitudes towards traditional knowledge and its transmission can often be prohibitive and secretive. While doing research on Kapingamarangi, Kenneth Emory realized that many informants were reluctant or unwilling to let him have access to their knowledge and history. While he recognized the closed nature and protective attitude towards knowledge sharing, he found that by using local informants and analyzing songs and chants, knowledge and history could be effectively gleaned. After reflecting on Emory’s clever and subversive methods, Lieber declared, “I suggest that Kapingamarangi is not the only oceanic atoll whose history can be recaptured through oral documents. Itang chants of the Eastern and Western Caroline Islands come immediately to mind. Because of the secrecy involved in this lore, however, I suspect that the collection and interpretation of these documents will need to be done by Micronesian researchers who them-
selves become initiates” (Lieber, 1992, p. 384). While Lieber’s observation may be accurate in that the secretive and closed nature of oral traditions at times makes it difficult for outsiders and westerners to gather information, there are times certain topics which seem to be exempt from these tight-lipped tendencies. Fortunately, one topic where information is reportedly not guarded or secretive is the topic of the Second World War. Anthropologists Poyer, Falgout and Carucci, in conducting their voluminous study of WWII in Micronesia, noted that “While most Micronesian indigenous history is treated as intellectual property, carefully guarded and transmitted only under restricted conditions, stories of the war are largely free of these constraints” (Poyer, Falgout, & Carucci, 2001, p. 333). Unlike many other topics, the war is talked about openly and gathering information is relatively easy as people are eager to share their stories. The anthropologists discovered that “The older generation wishes to ensure that their [war] experiences do not fade from collective memory, and they were eager to help us explore and record them” (Ibid., p. 333). The openness about World War II, as well as the public and performative nature of song, not only allows foreigners and outsiders to record and document the actual songs, chants, and stories of the war but it also enables researchers to ferret and extract other details and related information about the people, places, or tangential events mentioned in the songs. These songs serve as the vessels of important factual information. Lindstrom and White state, “Because the various wartime occurrences recorded in song are relatively recent, we have access to a good deal of contextual information about many of the particular events and people in the songs” (1993, p. 185). Through these songs, information can be obtained by probing about the specific people or events mentioned. Characters and events within the songs carry with them other stories and occurrences that can be further explored once an information base is established. Songs are not only useful in what they say but they are also invaluable because of what is not said but can be accessed subversively by field researchers. By deconstructing and analyzing song texts and the contexts in which songs were sung, anthropologists have been able to glean information in the past or “wring it dry” as Lieber says of Emory’s song studying techniques. The songs of war thus serve many purposes. In current times, songs are entertaining, informative, and documentary, and they serve as a means of preserving the culture, history, and experiences of the islanders during World War II.

**THEMES AND TOPICS OF WWII SONGS**

When analyzing the available songs, certain themes and topics reappeared throughout the islands and regions of Micronesia. The repetition and commonality of themes and topics is evidence that while each island had their own specific events and occurrences, many islanders across Micronesia shared some of the same experiences. The song texts explain the realities experienced by the Micronesians. By being able to read (or hear) these songs they composed, outsiders are able to understand the Micronesian experience and learn of the different ways the war affected (and perhaps continues to affect) the islanders’ lives. Suzanne Falgout declared the following about the various themes of war songs, “Common themes running throughout these World War II accounts are the bad conditions, the poor treatment by Japanese and Allies alike, and the question of why Pohnpei had been caught in the middle of this foreign war” (Falgout, 1989, p. 291). While those were the common topics she identified from Pohnpeian war songs, White and Lindstrom developed the following categories for the war songs they collected from throughout the Pacific;

*The songs in our corpus tell of a range of wartime events. Using our own rough categories, we have initially sorted them into eight groups. These include: (1) songs about wartime occupation and resistance; (2) songs about combat; (3) songs about working for the military forces; (4) songs about “cargo”; (5) laments of death and destruction; (6) songs of liberation; (7) songs of farewell and remembrance; and (8) songs of romance. (White and Lindstrom, 1993, p. 186)*
After reviewing the available songs, I arrived at my own seven categories: 1) forced labor; 2) challenging and stressful situations; 3) mandatory relocation; 4) nostalgia and longing; 5) political affiliations, loyalties, impositions, and associated resistance; 6) liberation; and 7) historical songs.

Micronesian songs and chants are fascinating because for the outsider, they allow insight into the lives, histories, and emotions of the Micronesians who experienced WWII. While these songs may be of use for the historian or anthropologist looking to understand the Micronesian wartime experience, the songs also serve a variety of functions for the Micronesians who composed them and for those islanders who, to this day, enjoy them.

**STORY-TELLING, HISTORY AND CULTURE SHARING**

One function of Micronesian WWII songs is to tell stories and share experiences with others. During the war years, Micronesians were often forced to leave their islands and relocate elsewhere, and islanders often found themselves separated from their loved ones. These were very painful experiences, and during these times many Micronesians composed songs so they could share these experiences and stories with their fellow islanders and loved ones once they were able to return home.

During WWII, Palauan and Pohnpeian men who went to New Guinea to do survey work for the Japanese composed songs about their journeys and experiences. Men from Kitti, Pohnpei also wrote songs about their trip to Kosrae where they were forced to labor, and the Nauruans sang songs about their forced relocation and their experiences on Chuuk. These Micronesians who were away from their loved ones during the war composed songs about their experiences away from home. Upon their return and during their reunion with their friends, family, and countrymen, they then proudly shared these songs. These WWII songs preserve the voices of those who were away and function as a form of story-telling. These songs help relate events to the islanders’ compatriots from whom they may have been far away during the war. The following quote is from a Nauruan about the celebration that occurred when they returned home after years in Chuuk.

> *We sang our songs. It was so sad because all the songs were about those we left behind and about the war and songs about starvation. So many kinds of songs! But we sang it that night. We managed to sing it, with tears and everything.* (Garrett, 1996, p. 82)

In addition to songs relating history, there are also songs that specifically serve to preserve it. Several songs embed specific characters, events, dates, and voyages into an oral record. These songs not only preserve the events but they also, by their repetition and transmission, fix certain historical events within peoples’ memories. An event memorialized in a song can be repeatedly passed on for several generations, whereas other events not sung about may be forgotten. As Suzanne Falgout (1989, p. 291) stated,

> *Occasionally, more elaborate memorial songs were composed to commemorate significant people and events. Certain events have achieved legendary status on the island. These are cast in the traditional episodic form and preserve important details about the significant people, places, and dates associated with these events.*

**COLLECTIVE MEMORY**

While many songs may present an individual’s account of a specific event or describe a certain person’s emotions in response to a situation, other songs serve as a type of “group testimony.” These songs are composed more or less from the collective memory of a group of people who have blended their recollections and interpretations into a common voice. These collective memories then become the accepted history of that group of people. One group of people may not necessarily relate an event in the same way as another group, but their collective and mediated memory can construct a unified voice or account and thereby this “group memory” will serve as their history. Songs serve in this way to embed collective memories and perceptions into accepted local histories. This function is perhaps best il-
Illustrated in the case of the Palauan song “The Merciless War of Rubak,” in which Morikawa, a Japanese man, is given the status of hero in Palauan history. While to this day Palauans credit Morikawa with saving the lives of countless islanders, he still actively denies that he was ever a spy for the Americans or that he assisted the Palauans. As Morikawa himself stated about his virtual apotheosis and the emptiness behind the Palauan claims,

*It may be interesting to know whether I was a spy or not. However, the more important fact of the story is that this is how the Palauans psychologically interpreted their wartime history. They created a ‘story of a man’ and have been believing it for over forty years.* (Higuchi, 1991, p. 156)

**ENTERTAINMENT AND DISTRACTION**

During the depressing and dangerous war, many Micronesians turned to song, dance, and familiar traditions to try to unite against adversity. While in many cases song, dance, fiestas, feasts, or speaking the native language were prohibited, when they could get away with it, Micronesians subversively practiced their traditional culture to maintain normalcy and familiarity. Embracing familiar cultural forms of expression (as much as they could without being punished) was also a strategy for mental and emotional survival during brutal times. They sought the outlets of songs, dance, and love to ease their minds and hearts of the tragedy and ugliness around them: “There were songs made about the war, but most were love songs. To me it appeared that while the war was getting worse and the laws tougher, the feeling for love was stronger” (Poyer, Falgout, and Carucci, 2001, p. 208). Although often prohibited, many Micronesians found ways to practice dance, song, and love discreetly and were eager to do so when they could: "Somehow, when the war was going on, there was also lots of dancing and celebrating [and love affairs going on]" (Ibid., p. 208). People sought opportunities to do something Micronesian because it was a familiar part of their past and part of their identity and culture; “during the war, as long as they could, people followed the custom of going from island to island for song fests—partly because they had always done it, but also as my attempts to stay busy to help distract me from sad thoughts, from my thinking about all sorts of things—suffering from fear and hunger” (Ibid., p. 206). Clearly, dance, music, song, and love were some of the strategies and tactics Micronesians used to distract their thoughts, soothe their fears, and remind them of a happier time. These songs may have offered Micronesians entertainment, distraction, and a small dose of familiarity in an otherwise largely foreign, Japanese, and oppressive world.

**HUMOR**

Another function that songs provided for the islanders was humor. During the bleak and depressing war years, song (and the singing of scandalous lyrics or the manipulating of lyrics or phonemes) may have been a way to provide humor and irony. The comedy and mockery which islanders infused into song may have helped them cope with wartime stress. In one song from Guam, the Chamorros proudly and loudly sang that the border of the Japanese flag was dirty (aplaeba) instead of white (apaca). This manipulation of lyrics to mock their Japanese oppressors could have provided a dose of comic relief for the war-affected Chamorros. Subversively laughing at their Japanese oppressors, their mistakes, or simply making light of their ignorance may have been a strategy that helped the islanders occasionally forget the magnitude and severity of their situations. As McClain and Clepton wrote, “this little song is a prime example of Guamanian humor” (1949, p. 229). During the long and depressing years of the war, some WWII songs offered comic relief during serious situations. In addition to using songs as a form of humor and storytelling, islanders also reportedly used song as a means of expressing their resistance.

**RESISTANCE**

While the war years may have been oppressive and difficult, some Micronesians found they could use songs as a medium to protest their situation and their treatment. The use of song as a means of resistance was widespread among the Chamorros still bravely loyal to America.
The Chamorros, who had been under the administration of the United States since 1898, refused to cooperate with their Japanese occupiers and often took deliberate action to undermine their authority or power. While the Japanese often were brutal in their treatment of the islanders, the Chamorros resisted and undermined the Japanese in the only way they could, subversively. One way was in their refusal to stop singing. Sanchez attests, “the most widespread form of resistance and the one which gave the people the most trouble came with singing. People sang happy songs and sad songs. It was only natural for them that resistance came with songs” (n.d., p. 225).

Both Sanchez and Santos stated that the Chamorros would sing these resistance songs proudly, openly voicing their opinions and feelings about their dissatisfaction with the Japanese rules and protesting their cruel treatment. Through song, these Chamorros would criticize their Japanese administrators, mock them, and audibly express their desire to be aligned and reunited with the United States. The Chamorros on Guam longed for the return of the Americans as they were tired of submitting to their Japanese oppressors and their culturally restrictive policies. Through songs, the Chamorros bravely aired their grievances and voiced their opposition. They were willing to sing these songs regardless of the punishment that might ensue. As Sanchez writes,

…pretty soon, everyone was singing [the resistance song] everywhere, day and night. The Keibitai and the Minseibu ordered the police, the teachers, and other Japanese officials to punish anyone—man, woman, or child—caught singing or whistling the song. Punishment did not stop it…. The song, the Chamorro way of resistance, like its verses, went on and on to the end of the occupation—much to the despair of the Japanese. (Sanchez, n.d., p. 226).

Chamorros were reportedly not the only group to have composed such songs. According to Falgout, “Some songs composed by Pohnpei leaders serve to unite their people and their protest against the poor conditions they were forced to endure” (Falgout 1989, p. 291). During the war, songs provided a form of vocal resistance and protest. By voicing their resistance, the islanders may have felt they were asserting their will or at least continuing to fight against their oppressors by refusing to submit mentally, emotionally, or ideologically.

**Therapeutic and Healing Functions**

While song may express public and active protest and resistance, the composing and singing of songs may have been the canvas and the venue for islanders to process, evaluate, and cope with their memories, their feelings, and their confused emotions. As Higuchi explained with respect to a stressful situation many Palauans were forced to endure,

Morikawa’s story, or that of the “man” that was named Morikawa, was created piece by piece by the Islanders’ fear, dissatisfaction, frustration, uneasiness, and anger associated with the extreme conditions of war experienced for the first time. The complex events of the story became understandable given the unique sociological and psychological pressures of war time” (Higuchi 1991, p. 155).

By writing a song about Morikawa, the Palauans could have been trying to piece together their feelings, beliefs, and impressions of an event that focused around the historical Japanese figure.

Lawson also attested, “[Songs were] the only lasting way in which the people could express their reactions and awareness of their vulnerability” (1989, p. 153). This statement also shows how through the composition of songs and lyrics, the islanders may have been trying to cope with their feelings of being vulnerable.

**Survival Tactics**

Islanders composed songs not only to help work through their experiences, but also to save their own lives in a time of crisis. Because they were commonly sung among Micronesians, songs would not have been suspected as anything especially important. Islanders reportedly used songs to hide or disguise messages that could save their lives. According to Falgout, during the construction of the air raid shelter supposedly meant to house a mass killing of Micronesians, islanders utilized song in
an attempt to save their lives: “while the men continued to build bomb shelters according to specifications, they secretly made plans to escape on both sides. These plans were codified in song and transmitted through the gossip network” (1991, p. 129). Falgout also said about Micronesian WWII songs in general, “[some] served as memory aids for secret plans to escape Japanese and Allied forces” (1989, p. 291). While the Palauans were never killed, execution style, as they feared they would be if the Japanese had attempted to gather them into the air raid shelter, the Palauans might have been able to escape through the instructions they encoded and sang in their songs.

GROUP IDENTITY
In addition to preserving history and culture, providing entertainment, and helping islanders to survive the war, WWII songs also provided an opportunity for Micronesians to assert and celebrate their group identity. As Lawson explains, “World War II was the first time large numbers of outsiders had come to the islands, and this forced the I-Kiribati (and Banabans) to become acutely aware of their own culture and identity by comparison” (1989, p. 154). Prior to WWII, some Micronesians may not have had much contact with other islands, groups, or villages and therefore they may never have really had to think much about their own identity. As a result of the interactions during WWII, many Micronesians for the first time may have felt as if they were a single group of people with a common history and shared experience. Through the composing and performing of songs, the Kiribati people could express how they felt different than other groups of people. The song lyrics they composed served to help the Kiribati people mark their uniqueness and “insider status” by making special reference to local places or sacred legends. Composing, understanding or knowing how to sing certain songs can serve as a marker of identity or ethnicity, because the intricacies, meanings, and events of the song texts may be inaccessible to outsiders. In Pohnpei, the “Memorial Song of Kosrae” was composed by a Kittitian who was among the 179 sent to labor in Kosrae. While this song serves especially to memorialize these men, it also serves to boast about talents of the people of Kittitian and the superiority of Pohnpeian culture. Of the 179 men who left, all but six returned alive. This incredible survival is thought to be a product of being Pohnpeian and adhering to the traditions of the land and the culture. This song functions not only to commend the miraculous feat of one chiefdom (Kitti), but also to declare a feeling of pride and superiority in being raised the Pohnpeian way,

In other areas, the people of Pohnpei believe their wartime success was unequalled. One source of inspiration is the remarkable survival of Kittitian men who returned from Kosrae—only six of the 179 died. The success of these men is largely attributed to the wisdom and strength of some Pohnpeian traditions. (Falgout, 1989, p. 292)

This song can function as a source of pride for Pohnpeians as they differentiate themselves, through their successes, from other Micronesian islanders.

TEACHING AND MNEMONIC DEVICES
Certain Micronesian war songs also function as teaching devices. The song “Kerradel” from Palau details the travels of the Palauans as they were being moved from island to island during the war. According to the song file, the song “enumerates a string of meaningful places” (White, Song File, p. 114). The fact that these places, which are integral to the history of the people from Peleliu, are preserved in the lyrics of the song is not coincidental. By “Kerradel” being publicly performed, taught to children, and passed on, the repetitive and popular song becomes almost subliminally instructive. The “enumeration of meaningful places” within a song inclines people to learn and remember the historical movements of the Palauan people during the war. In addition to songs from Palau teaching about the forced relocation of Palauan people, songs also served as teaching devices when the lyrics contained detailed information on available escape routes that could save the islanders’ lives.
CONCLUSION
While song in Micronesia may not yet have received a substantial amount of attention, it is clear that the composing and performing of songs serve many functions for Micronesians. For the Micronesians who sang these songs, these songs were a vehicle for storytelling, served as a recording of collective memory, provide humor, entertainment, and distraction, offered therapeutic or healing functions, acted as a form of resistance, provided a sense of group identity, and serve as mnemonic devices. The WWII songs of Micronesians served many purposes during the war and now, over 60 years after the end of WWII, that songs are still being sung and transmitted is a testimony to the value and importance of the songs in Micronesian cultures and societies.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY AND CONTACT
Tammy Duchesne holds a graduate certificate in Museum Studies from George Washington University in Washington, D.C., a MA in Micronesian Studies from University of Guam, a MA in Teaching from the Elms College, and a BA in Spanish and Anthropology from Tulane University. She currently lives in Guam and looks forward to further investigating the role of song in perpetuating island histories.

CONTACT: Tammy Duchesne, PO BOX 12034, Tamuning, GU 96931E-mail tammyduchesne@gmail.com