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## THE POLITICS OF PRESERVATION Historical Memory and the Division of the Mariana Islands

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Over the course of the past three centuries, the native Chamorros of the Mariana Islands have endured colonization by four different countries – Spain, the United States, Germany, and Japan. This protracted colonial history can be read as a story of violence and dismemberment, each colonizer inflicting its particular forms of political, cultural, and psychological violence upon the Chamorro people. This paper examines the ways in which various forms of historic preservation express Chamorro experiences of colonization, reflecting upon issues of Chamorro nationalism, Euro-American colonialism, and the politics of history writing in the Mariana Islands.

In the United States Territory of Guam, as in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), historical events over the past four centuries can be read as story of continuous violence and dismemberment. With the unfortunate distinction of having been colonized by four different countries -- Spain, the United States, Germany, and Japan -- the Chamorro natives of the Mariana Islands have experienced myriad forms of possession and dispossession, their bodies slain in battle and their islands severed in treaty. Indeed, the history of violence and dismemberment can be traced to the very first encounter between Pacific Islanders and Europeans, this in 1521 when Ferdinand Magellan sailed into Guam's waters on behalf of Spain. In retribution for the taking of a skiff off of one of his three ships, Magellan landed with a party of forty armed men and proceeded to burn down a village and several outrigger canoes. The Spanish landing party also murdered and disembowelled seven Chamorros, removing their intestines apparently in order to cure the sick men on board their ships.<sup>1</sup>

This murder and gutting of Chamorro bodies was the first recorded act of dismemberment in Pacific history and can be read symbolically to represent the larger story of colonial violence. This storyline continued in 1898 when the Mariana Island archipelago was severed in two as a result of the Spanish-American War, Guam becoming a possession of the United States through conquest and its northern sister islands sold, as if chattel, to Germany. Yet if history unleashed myriad violent events against the Chamorro people, so, too, has the preservation of history and historical memory enacted its own violence against the island natives. It has done so in part by romanticizing and celebrating the colonial history of the islands, rather than acknowledging them as pivotal events that continue to undermine Chamorro cultural, political, and economic sovereignty.

How have we remembered and preserved our historical memories? What messages have we conveyed, or failed to convey, in our remembrances of history? How well do the various forms of historic preservation reflect the

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experiences and emotions of the Islanders themselves? This paper attempts to address these questions by focusing on the treatment of the 1898 division of the Mariana Islands in the four history textbooks that have dominated Mariana Islands' classrooms over the past forty years. As the earliest-written and most widely read history books in the Marianas, these texts represent the general understanding of Chamorro history by the public at-large and thus wield considerable power and influence. These books are, in chronological order, Paul Carano and Pedro Sanchez's *A Complete History of Guam* (1964), Pedro Sanchez's *Guaban Guam: The History of Our Island* (1989), Don Farrell's *The History of the Northern Mariana Islands* (1991), and Robert Rogers' *Destiny's Landfall: A History of Guam* (1995).<sup>2</sup> An examination of these canonical history textbooks demonstrates that the preservation of historical memory is a deeply political, and thus profoundly powerful, pursuit.

### **DISMEMBERING CHAMORRO ISLANDS**

In both US and World Historiography, the 1898 Spanish-American War is nicknamed the "Splendid Little War," "splendid" for adding overseas colonies to the American body politic for the first time, and "little" in reference to the negligible Spanish resistance and consequently minor casualty rate. Although events in Cuba served as the spark and locus of this conflict, US leaders also deployed battleships to conquer and colonize additional Spanish colonies in the Pacific, namely Guam and the Philippines. In 1898, en route to Manila Bay, four American ships received special orders from the Secretary of the Navy to detour to Guam and conquer the island in the name of the United States. Thus on the morning of June 20, 1898, the USS *Charleston* arrived on island, accompanied by three troop transport ships—the *City of Peking*, *City of Sydney*, and *Australia*—carrying on board roughly 5,600 American navy and marine men in anticipation of combat against the Spanish military.

On June 20, 1898, at 8:30 a.m., the USS *Charleston*, along with the three accompanying troop transport ships, sailed into Apra Harbor. In view of the two Spanish forts that loomed above the harbor's entrance, Forts Santiago

and Santa Cruz, the American battleship anxiously fired 10 cannon shots, nervously anticipating the return gunfire that might descend upon them from the forts. Yet as Navy records reported, "The only thing that happened was that a couple of men in a canoe quickly paddled away, double time, for the beach! They proved to be fishermen."<sup>3</sup>

In fact, Spanish administrators throughout the Mariana Islands were not as yet aware of the on-going war between the two countries. Spanish mail ships to the Marianas had been infrequent and thus island leaders had not received word that Spain and the United States were at war. Consequently, colonial officials misinterpreted "Captain Glass's volley of serious fire as a friendly announcement of his arrival as a visitor."<sup>4</sup> Assuming incorrectly that the cannon fire was a friendly salute to announce their arrival, officials at the port "sent for two of the six little antique brass cannons in Agaña to be brought to the port to return the courtesy."<sup>5</sup>

In a gesture of hospitality, a small boat flying the Spanish flag approached the *Charleston*, essentially to welcome the ship and clear it through customs, but the passengers aboard the canoe were seized as prisoners of war. They were later released with instructions to inform the Spanish governor that Guam was under attack. The next morning, Spanish Governor of the Mariana Islands, Don Juan Marina, arrived at Apra Harbor to meet with Captain Glass. There Marina received a message to surrender Guam within 30 minutes or face further armed assault. He delayed for 29 minutes before officially surrendering the island. Histories of the event note that during the entire episode, the American military men behaved as gentlemen, with "absolute obedience and splendid discipline."<sup>6</sup>

Thus in the course of a day, the Chamorro people would become innocently entangled in a world war that entangled Europe, the Americas, Asia, and the Pacific. At its conclusion, this war would have a singularly dramatic impact upon the Chamorro future, as the islands were severed into two separate political entities. The United States seized Guam, while Spain later sold its sovereignty over the Northern Mariana Islands to Germany and it would later to be

transferred to yet another country, Japan, after Germany's defeat in the First World War. The partitioning of the Chamorro people that began in 1898 continues to vex the islands today, particularly as a result of World War II hostilities that pitted the Chamorro people, once brothers and sisters, as enemies on opposite sides of the global conflict.

Yet despite the dramatic and traumatic consequences of the Spanish-American War, Guam's history books instead promote a view of that war as benign. Indeed, despite its grave consequences, historians have treated this momentous war as a comic opera, filled with humorous situations and characters. Indeed, *Destiny's Landfall* describes the USS *Charleston's* conquest as an "almost comical seizure."<sup>7</sup> The historiographical storyline indicated in the Rogers textbook, but also replicated in the other texts, emphasizes farcical elements such as the frightened local fishermen who paddled their canoes away from the American invaders, the stunned surprise of the uninformed colonial officials, the abject military impotence of Guam's Spanish colonizers, and most absurd of all, the embarrassment of mistaking a wartime bombing for a friendly salute.

Of the transference of sovereignty from Spain to the United States, textbooks are in agreement. Carano and Sanchez assess the outcomes of the Spanish-American War as "the transference of political control over Guam from an old and declining nation of the Old World to a young and emerging nation of the New World."<sup>8</sup> This analysis replicates the "Splendid Little War" historiography common in US History textbooks, telling a dual story of America's rise to global power and Spain's demise from its previous position of influence. But did Chamorros indeed perceive this as a "splendid" and "little" war? Their sovereignty now passed into new hands and their cultural and political unity now split in two, how do Chamorros remember these historical events? Do the island's textbooks allow different memories of these events to be voiced?

Alone among the four textbooks, Don Farrell's *History of the Northern Mariana Islands* inserts an awareness of the Spanish-American War's grave outcomes. In this high school textbook used extensively throughout the

CNMI, Farrell writes, "the political separation of the Marianas ... would have a profound effect on the destiny of the people of the Northern Mariana Islands."<sup>9</sup> Although Farrell does not further elaborate, he rightly suggests the traumas involved and foreshadows the challenges ahead.

Yet if one believes history books such as Sanchez's *Guaban Guam*, we would get a picture of Chamorros as happily conquered. Sanchez states that Guam's Chamorros "could hardly repress their satisfaction."<sup>10</sup> Analyses of the 1898 War in both *The Complete History of Guam* and *Guaban Guam* imply that, despite more than two centuries as Spanish subjects, in the course of a mere 24 hours the native Chamorros simply and eagerly switched their allegiances to another country. Chamorros are thus canonically represented as enthusiastically accepting this change in sovereignty. Yet contradictory evidence exists, such as one written by Spanish Augustinian priests Ildefonso Cabanillas and Crisógono Ortín who report, "The entire populace became very alarmed and their great distress was very evident."<sup>11</sup> The priests' account continues to say that "Entire families, overwhelmed by fear and anguish, abandoned their homes and fled into the bush. A large number of devout families flocked to the church, fervently and tearfully beseeching God to put an end to this calamity."<sup>12</sup>

The account of Cabanillas and Ortín reveal Chamorros not in celebration of this attack on their island, but rather of fear and anxiety, yet any evidence of Chamorro uncertainties about the meanings of this American act of war on Guam has not been reflected in the island's history textbooks. Similarly, in his consideration of Spain's eventual sale of the northern islands to Germany, Farrell's Northern Marianas history asserts a highly positive response to this change of sovereignty. He writes, "The Germans became known for their politeness and excellent education and the people of Saipan were extremely happy with them from the first moment."<sup>13</sup> Farrell, like Carano and Sanchez before him, unapologetically celebrates colonialism and silences any experiences of trepidation or uncertainty. Further, no signs of native dissension or apprehension are provided, yet perhaps this is an oversimplification

and over-homogenization of the Northern Marianas response, as Cabanillas and Ortín well illustrate in the case of Guam's Chamorros.

What were the full wide range of responses to the new arrival of American and German colonizers? In what ways did the division of the Mariana Islands body into two political pieces affect Chamorro families and clans on both sides of this new imaginary divide? These questions remained unanswered in the textbooks being read by high school and college students throughout Guam and the CNMI, yet should be the sort of inquiries that drive current research initiatives. Lingering memories of the 1898 division can and must be sought out from the generation who experienced it themselves as well as from those who learned about it through their parents. Indeed, while present-day researchers cannot undo the historical damages suffered by Chamorro bodies and islands, we are challenged to preserve historical memories in ways that reflect the diverse islander experience of it. As persons involved in historic preservation, whether in the form of written text, historical landmark, or another markers of historical memory, we share a responsibility to tell the histories of our people, stories of survival, of hardship and joy, of celebration and pain. This will require digging, searching, sweating, reading, and writing, talking, and most especially, listening. Yet the stories of our past are there, if we are keen to look and listen.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Antonio Pigafetta, *Magellan's Voyage: A Narrative Account of the First Circumnavigation*. R.A. Skelton, Translator and editor. New York: Dover Publications, 1969, 60.
- <sup>2</sup> Kelly Marsh-Kautz's 2002 master's thesis, *Haji Hao? Analyzing Indigenous and Multi-Ethnic/Multi-Cultural Community Representation in Guam History Textbooks*, evaluates the use of these textbooks in the Guam public school system, from elementary through university levels of instruction.
- <sup>3</sup> R.E. Coontz, *From the Mississippi to the Sea*. Philadelphia, PA: Dorrance, 1930, 204-205.
- <sup>4</sup> Charles Beardsley. *Guam: Past and Present*. Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle Company, Inc., 1964, 192.

- <sup>5</sup> Robert Rogers, *Destiny's Landfall: A History of Guam*. Honolulu: Univ of Hawai'i Press, 1995, 110.
- <sup>6</sup> William Braunersreuther, Lieutenant. "Report of Lt. William Braunersreuther On The Capture of Guam." Cited from The Spanish-American War Centennial Website, [www.spanamwar.com/Guamrpt.htm](http://www.spanamwar.com/Guamrpt.htm), accessed on September 29, 2005.
- <sup>7</sup> Rogers, 112.
- <sup>8</sup> Paul Carano and Pedro Sanchez, *The Complete History of Guam*, Seventh Printing. Rutland, VT and Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle, 1964, 219.
- <sup>9</sup> Don Farrell, *History of the Northern Mariana Islands*. Saipan: Public School System, 1991, 243.
- <sup>10</sup> Pedro Sanchez, *Guaban Guam: The History of Our Island*. Hagåtña: Sanchez Publishing House, 1989,74.
- <sup>11</sup> Fray Ildelfonso Cabanillas and Fray Crisógono Ortín, O.A.R. "Memoria: A description of the events that have taken place on this Island of Guajan, Mariana Islands, since 20 June 1898," written 25 September 1899. *The Augustinian Recollect Friars in the Mariana Islands, 1769-1908*. Marjorie G. Driver, Translator. Mangilao, Guam: Micronesian Area Research Center, 2000, 48.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid, 48.
- <sup>13</sup> Farrell, 242.

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