



## Guam History and Culture: Navigating the Sea of Time



**“The Chamorros are a proud people with a unique story; a culture with a magical past and an optimistic future.”**

The scene is the present, but it doesn't feel that way. As the last rays of a setting sun offer a bit of dim light for guidance, a group of visitors slowly advance up a sandy trail into the darkness of the distant past. This pathway leads from the beach into a thickly wooded area alive with the sounds of animals and broad leaves rattling in the wind. Up ahead in the rapidly falling darkness, a fire burns in the center of what was once the ancient village of Gogna, and at present is the site of the Lina'la' Chamorro Cultural Park. As the visitors begin to congregate around the fire, which in a short while will help serve to illuminate the past, they are joined by a second group comprised of storytellers and experts on ancient customs, who on this night will share a special story

about the beginning of time, the beginning of life and a beginning for the Chamorros, the native people of Guam. A hush falls over the now enlarged group as the story of *I Nina'huyong* begins in the form of chant by the *Maga'lahi*, or chief, whose muscular frame and crescent shaped neckwear, *sinahi*, glows in the firelight. This story of creation recounts a beginning when all things were as one and continues in time to recall how the first great navigator began his journey and founded a people. As the visitors amongst the group are seated, the story is animated through fire, dance and chant.

A celestial navigator and the first Chamorro, Puntan, comes upon an island uninhabited, pristine and at this moment in time, nameless. From

“The Chamorros today take great interest in keeping traditional customs alive and celebrating the past, forming a strong identity for today into tomorrow.”



this first Chamorro come many, and a people of the sea become inhabitants of this new land. The chant continues and ends with a call and response led by the *Maga'lahi* proudly proclaiming “The pride of the Chamorro people. We are the ancient people. The first people.” Thus spoken, an oral tradition is kept alive for a successive generation and shared amongst the visitors of this ancient village. It is an affirmation of existence; a celebration of the roots that hold firm in the sometimes shifting sands of time.

The ancient Chamorro culture is rich with such myths and legends and is a culture that traces roots through history past several millennia. Much of this ancient history has been obscured by time, but through oral histories such as these recounting the past, the writings of early explorers and missionary accounts of what life was like hundreds of years ago, as well as archeological evidence of what has been built and crafted, a picture of the past may be formed. As with any look into the deep

past, mythology and legends can serve as a guide in discovering the heritage of a people, what their values are and what traditions they hold dear.

This identity begins in the past. As the legend told by the *Maga'lahi* illustrates, the island now known as Guam was first inhabited by a seafaring people, who most likely originated from South-east Asia several thousands of years ago. Through millennia this Chamorro culture honed unique skills, crafts and structures, such as the *latte* stone, a support pillar carved of limestone or basalt, which is synonymous with both a period of the past and still serves as an important symbol for the present. Indeed, these monolithic support structures, comprised of a base called *haligi*, or pillar, and a capstone called *tasa*, or cup, were designed and constructed with brilliance and ingenuity, allowing for the pillar and capstone to shift comfortably without toppling over. This distinct architectural innovation is only found within the Sinahi archipelago, the crescent shaped

island chain where Guam is geographically both the largest and southernmost island.

As may be expected from a culture that was able to travel such long distances over sea so long ago, the early Chamorros were certainly skilled navigators and are thought to have been expert canoe crafters as well. Although it is difficult to be sure from the archaeological record what exactly this early craft may have looked like,





European accounts of a speedy canoe called a *proa* describes a fast vessel that was used for travel and fishing by the native islanders. In fact, it was so nimble and swift it was often nicknamed “the flying proa.”

Life during the time of the pre-contact Chamorro was sustained from both the bountiful sea and the lush surrounding landscape. It is known that a caste system existed with an upper, middle and lower class, with distinct barriers between each. *Makanas*, or shamans, helped facilitate contact with the *taotaomo'na*, the spirits of the ancient, for the benefit of those living in the visible world. For thousands of years the culture matured, yet like the cycles existing in nature, what was once discovered by the early Chamorro would again be found by later explorers. The bright crescent hanging in the sky from a waxing moon marking a beginning would eventually be replaced by a waning moon's crescent signifying an end. A new era was about to begin.

On March 6th, 1521, Ferdinand Magellan and his crew of exhausted sailors drop anchor in Umatac Bay off of southern Guam. Confusion, misunderstanding and finally a form of compromise ensues. It is on this occasion that



the first contact between Chamorros and Europeans is known to have taken place. When Magellan's ships finally depart, it is unclear if the robustious and curious islanders know of the waves of change that are coming in the wake.

Over the course of the next four and a half centuries, a new cycle would begin and change would come. It was an era of exploration and colonization, and less than fifty years after Magellan's departure, the island would be formally claimed by Spain, and by the second half of the seventeenth century would begin to be settled by Spaniards and the missionaries who accompanied them. A culture that had developed over thousands of years would undergo rapid transformation. The Spanish brought with them new flora and fauna, new ways of cooking and new ways of living. They also brought new ways of worshipping, with the introduction of Roman Catholicism to the island. Guam became an important stop on trade routes between east and west. Although there was a degree of cooperation and friendship between the original inhabitants of Guam and the newcomers, conflict would arise which would claim the life of Chamorros and Spanish alike. Unfortunately, such conflict along with disease took



a heavy toll on the local population, and many customs, traditions and knowledge of the old ways died with them. Many Chamorros converted to Christianity, took up Spanish customs and intermarried. Spanish rule would continue until the waning days of the nineteenth century, when American ships and the Treaty of Paris would once again bring change.

At the beginning of what would later be characterized as the “American Century,” Guam became a possession of the United States and would be administered by the Department of the Navy, and for a little over forty years this arrangement would remain in place. Over four hundred years had passed since Guam and the Chamorros were a world within themselves, yet now they could not escape the conflict in the world around them, and in 1941, Japanese forces wrested control of the island from the American Armed Forces. However, the Americans would return and on July 21st, 1944 the Battle of Guam began, and for over two weeks a hard fought struggle would be waged for the island's future. In the end, it was the Americans who remained, and after many centuries involving both peace and conflict with the outside world, a new era of prosperity begins on Guam. It is an era of



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modernization and Americanization, yet is also a time of awakening and a desire to reconnect with the past.

Today, Guam is an island of people who wave a welcoming hand at visitors from around the world, inviting them to our shores to experience the natural beauty, warmth and friendliness of our island. We are a United States Territory and the furthest reach of America to the west. Our island is a crossroads and a gateway, and it is where the rays of the rising sun first fall on American soil every new day. This is an island that celebrates the past and welcomes the future, a place where cosmopolitan

ideals and traditional respect can coexist, while historical fact and magical thought can dance together hand in hand around a fire. A respect for the past runs strong on Guam, and many local Chamorros go to great lengths and effort to unearth the secrets of the past and preserve it for future generations. With this knowledge comes pride; the pride of the Chamorro people, the ancient people, the first people of Guam. ■

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