Pulan Sumongsong
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Together, Mending The Nets

Welcome to Sumongsong! According to historian Toni Malia Ramirez, Sumongsong means, "to plug," such as, to "plug the sky" and stop the rain. Therefore, Sumongsong marks the beginning of the dry season. The dry season is called *Fañomnagan*, which historian Pale' Eric Forbes has said, is derived from the word *somnak*, meaning "sunshine"— thus, we are entering the "time of sunshine." Sumongsong was the season in the ancient CHamoru/Chamorro lunar calendar for "staying in the village" *(songsong)* to repair fishing nets, canoes and other tools that had been used the months prior and in preparation for the coming year.

In this issue we look at the sense of community during the Christmas holiday season that is part of life in the Marianas. Living in small island communities requires that people get along and take care of each other. The spirit of the season also compels us to be generous and kind towards each other and to be grateful for the gifts, physical and spiritual, each of us brings as the ultimate expressions of our humanity.

Chamorro/CHamoru Seagrass Fishing Nets

Many activities in Chamorro/CHamoru culture are social and communal, calling people to gather and work together. Fishing in groups was not uncommon, especially fishing with nets. The Chamorros/CHamorus used different kinds of fishing nets, including surround, gill, and hand nets, depending on what they were trying to catch. The nets were often used along with fishing lines made from coconut husk *(as sennit)* or hibiscus *(pago)*.

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They also made fishing nets from *Lo'u (Enhalus acoroides)*, a common seagrass, also called turtle grass or eel grass in English. *Lo'u* is common throughout the Western Pacific and is able to withstand wave action and tidal currents. *Lo'u* was used for *chenchulu* (drag nets) and *lagua'* (hand nets) because the fibers were strong and durable.

In 1719 the German Jesuit Priest Joseph Bonani observed the use of seagrass for fishing nets in Luta (Rota). One hundred years later in 1819 members of the Freycinet scientific expedition also observed Chamorros/CHamorus using seagrass fishing nets. One of the most well-known lithographs produced during this expedition is a village scene of people using different kinds of nets and repairing a large surround net on the shore. Click here to learn more about seagrass fishing nets. For more on ancient Chamorro/CHamoru fishing tools, click here.

Chamorro/CHamoru Cultural Values: *Afa'maolek Yan Geftao*

Many of what we think of as individual Chamorro/CHamoru cultural values actually work in tandem with each other. *Afa'maolek* means that we not only get along with each other, but that we also share and do good things for each other. *Gineftao*, which comes from *geftao*, is to be generous and giving, not only in terms of gifts, but in how we treat each other. For example, a Chamorro/CHamoru host's goal is to make their guests comfortable, offering food or drinks, checking on guests' comfort, and giving them something to take with them when they leave, such as *balutan* after a fiesta, or food that has been packed for them to take home.

Chamorros/CHamorus have been known to be generous in offering unlimited use of their own resources, such as land, for those in need, to be returned when the need has been satisfied. When there is abundance, such as a good catch of fish, it was customary to share the catch with others in the village. Being generous with each other ensures the community's needs, sometimes above individual needs, are met. One's generosity is a source of pride, but more importantly, it allows others to give back to you in return, to reciprocate, which is another central value in Chamorro/CHamoru culture. To be the opposite, or *chattao* (selfish), risks causing bad feelings or shame not just to the individual but to the family as a whole. To learn more, click here.

Nobenan I Niñu Jesus—Novena to the Christ Child

Usually beginning nine days before Christmas, the *Nobenan I Niñu Jesus* is a series of devotional prayers recited in honor of the Christ Child. The novena focuses on the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and the oneness of Jesus, a man, with God the Father. The last day of the *Nobenan Niñu* can end on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, New Year's Eve, New Year's Day, or on Three King's Day on 6 January. This practice serves not only as an important Catholic ritual, but also strengthens family ties and passes on Chamorro/CHamoru family traditions and virtues.

Preparing for the *nobena* may involve the construction within the household of a *bilen*, or nativity scene, depicting Christ's birth. Often, family members work together to design the *bilen*, gather the needed materials, and build the structure. Sometimes the *bilen* is quite elaborate, with statues of farm animals, shepherds and the three kings in addition to the main figures of the Baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph surrounded by a lush setting of natural and artificial materials.

The *Nobenan Niñu* in the Chamorro/CHamoru language probably did not come about until the 1920s because people prayed mainly in Spanish until that time. Spanish Capuchin Pale' Roman Maria de Vera translated many prayers from Spanish and Latin into Chamorro/CHamoru. You can view the *Nobenan Niñu* prayer book here.

Burego'

Delving into Christmas past in the Marianas brings to light another tradition that very few people know about!

Burego' was a celebration where young people, primarily teenagers, went house-to-house in costumes. The word means "incognito, a person in disguise; a clown." The fun of *burego'* was guessing the masqueraders' identity and teasing them about their costumes.

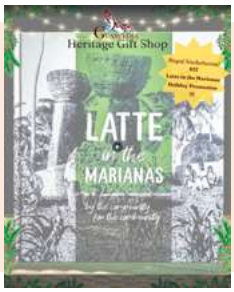
Costumes included *taotaomo'na* in white sheets with black smudges on their faces, girls dressed as lancheras (ranchers), boys dressed in *mestizas* or *muumuu's*, to teenagers in masks and gunny sacks. Others dressed as the Holy Family of Joseph and Mary carrying a doll representing Jesus.

Residents shared food with the masqueraders, especially *boñelus dagu*. In Humåtak, Guam, teens visited houses to collect a whole plate of food, and then afterwards, went to Midnight Mass. After mass they sat in a circle near the church and ate.

According to Dr. Larry Cunningham, *burego'* was a Spanish custom adopted in the Marianas in the 1700s. The roots of *burego'* in Spain came from the Roman custom of saturnalia, a December solstice festival for Saturn, the Roman god of time, wealth, agriculture, and renewal. Cunningham also noted that when informants were asked, almost everyone agreed that burego' was celebrated on Christmas Eve, but historian Pale' Eric Forbes found that, on Saipan, it may have been during the Christmas season but not necessarily on Christmas Eve. In Santa Rita, a village transplanted from Sumay, *burego'* was celebrated on Christmas Eve, New Year's Eve, and the Feast of Three Kings, with the biggest celebration on Christmas Eve. To read the entry click here.

The Young Maidens Who Saved Guam

While seagrass and coconut *sennit* were the more common materials used to weave fishing nets, a well-known folktale from Guam tells of a magical net woven of women's hair that saved the island from being eaten up by a large fish! The island's odd shape has the appearance as though large bites were taken from the mid-section on the east and west coasts. According to the story, with both men and women working together, but particularly through the wisdom of the women, the people of Guam found a way to capture the fish that threatened to destroy their island altogether! Read the story here.



Magof Nochebuena Holiday Promotion

Still looking for that special gift? Visit the Guampedia Heritage Online Gift Shop for some great Marianas-themed books and gifts on sale now for the "holiday season".

Historical Highlights: Arrival of the Sisters of Mercy in Guam (November 1946)

When the Sisters of Mercy arrived in Guam in November 1946, it made big news. Reverend Mother Maura Buchheit from the Regional Sisters of Mercy in Belmont, North Carolina, responded to Bishop Apollinaris Baumgartner's invitation to establish a convent and to help in the rebuilding of war-devastated Guam. The first three sisters to arrive included Sr. Inez Underwood - the daughter of James H. and Ana Pangelinan Martinez Underwood. Word of their arrival spread rapidly. As one of the sisters recalled:

"We shall never forget for example the loyalty of the people, who, despite the fact that we arrived on a weekday, took hours off their work, the children took time out of school and all activities seemed to have stopped while the words 'The sisters of Mercy are here' passed from mouth to mouth! We were followed, we were gazed upon, we were spoken of, some of the people who had never before seen a Sister looked at us with awe…We had come to Guam expecting to find very little in the line of material comfort…the first thing that greeted our eyes was a neat little fence surrounding four Quonset huts and above the gateway a huge sign that read: Mercy Convent, Sisters of Mercy, Belmont, NC. We were home again, and a feeling of deep satisfaction came over us—we were no longer strangers to this island, that boasted of a Mercy convent."

On 12 December 1946, the Foundation Day of Mercy in Guam, 10 girls became postulants in the new community, and within six months, 10 more girls joined. Read about the Sisters of Mercy in Guam here. To learn more about religious sisters in postwar Guam, click here.