**The Mission in the Marianas**

The islands that later came to be known as the Marianas were the first that Magellan encountered during his historic voyage across the Pacific in 1521. During a brief layover at Guam in March of that year, Magellan and his half-starved crew welcomed dozens of islanders on their three ships before a fight erupted, thus initiating the relationship between the Island Pacific and the West. Magellan’s voyage may have put the Island Pacific on the Western map, but it was Miguel de Legazpi who, in 1565, claimed formal possession of the islands for Spain. Following Legazpi’s visit, the Manila galleon route was established, with Guam serving as a provisioning stop-over on the annual run. Still another century would pass before Spain finally established a permanent presence in the island group.

*Arrival of First Missionaries*

In June 1668, six Spanish Jesuits, led by Fr. Diego Luis de San Vitores, arrived at Guam to found the first mission in the island group. This event represented a significant milestone inasmuch as it was the first mission established anywhere in the Pacific. (The next missionary thrust, initiated by British, would not occur for another century.) The achievement was not easily accomplished, however. For five years San Vitores, whose family connections provided direct access to the Spanish court, appealed directly to the Queen Regent, Mariana of Austria, to secure permission and funding for the mission. When authorization was granted, despite the resistance of the governor of the Philippines, Mariana was awarded the compliment of having the islands named for her.[[1]](#footnote-0)

The Jesuits were not accompanied by the troops usually assigned to protect the missionaries in newly colonized parts of the world. San Vitores, confident of the gentleness of the island people, claimed that there was no need of a military detachment. In fact, he argued that a military garrison would create more problems than it would solve. Instead, he selected 31 lay volunteers, a mix of Filipinos and creoles from Mexico, to assist the priests and protect them–his *Escuadrón Mariano*, as he called it. The group was a rag-tag lot that included two 12-year-old boys, tradesmen, a married couple, and only one individual with any military experience.[[2]](#footnote-1)

Soon after disembarking at Hagatna, the missionary band received a hearty welcome from the local chief of Hagatna, who had invited other leaders to attend the gathering. All the local chiefs were presented with a piece of iron hoop, a prized commodity in a society that depended on shell and stone for fashioning its tools. Within the next day or two, the missionaries baptized 23 islanders, mostly young children, and plans were already underway to spread out and bring the gospel to the main villages on the island.[[3]](#footnote-2) Before long, the missionary party, with the help of the islanders, erected small wooden huts to serve as the church and the residence for the priests and their helpers. Meanwhile, three of the priests were assigned to the islands of Rota and Tinian to undertake the conversion of the northern part of the archipelago. A school for boys was opened in Agana, the main village on Guam–the first formal education offered anywhere in the Pacific.

San Vitores himself presented a strange spectacle as he walked barefoot wearing a cloak of plaited palm leaves over his threadbare black cassock with a conical palm-leaf hat on his head. His own mission approach, patterned after techniques that he had successfully used in the Philippines and Mexico, was to march into a village at the head of his mission helpers as they chanted a religious refrain like “Nuestra alegria/ Jesu y Maria.” He would then go from house to house baptizing and singing prayers composed in the island language. San Vitores, who often chanted and sang until he became hoarse, was fittingly described by his first biographer as “Christ’s troubador.”[[4]](#footnote-3)

*Violent Resistance*

Despite their enthusiastic reception and their early successes, violent encounters soon began to occur with frightening frequency. Just two months after their arrival, one of the Jesuit priests was seriously wounded. Not long afterwards, two of the lay helpers were killed; and then one of the priests met his death at the hands of angry islanders. The mounting violence was attributed in part to the story spread by a Chinese resident, shipwrecked years earlier, that the priests were poisoning the children with the water they used for baptism. But the missionaries provoked a hostile reaction when they destroyed the ancestral skulls carefully preserved and venerated by the islanders on the grounds that they were nothing more than religious idols. Then, in April 1672, Fr. Diego Luis de San Vitores was killed together with his young assistant, Pedro Calungsod, after baptizing an infant against the wishes of the child’s father. In recent years both were recognized as martyrs for the faith, San Vitores through beatification and Calugsod by full canonization.

The first thirty years of the mission were tumultuous ones. There were occasional attacks on priests and small mission parties, often in retaliation for personal offense given or due to resentment at the missionaries’ belittlement of island cultural practices. Spanish troops, finally summoned by the Jesuits following the death of San Vitores, punished such offenses. Frequently this punishment took the form of putting to the torch canoes or homes abandoned by the islanders. On at three occasions, large numbers of island men gathered to surround the missionary compound in Hagatna, now protected by a fortification. and hold the newcomers prisoners in their own dwelling for months at a time. Even these long sieges ended with surprisingly little loss of life. Somehow, despite these violent outbreaks, the missionaries continued their evangelization, and the number of Christians increased steadily. In fact, in some of the later violent encounters the missionaries received more support from local forces led by newly baptized islanders than from Spanish troops.

By 1690 the violence had all but ended as most of the island population was converted. The total loss of life in what are sometimes called the “Spanish-Chamorro Wars” was perhaps 200 in all: about 120 islanders and another 80 of the “Spanish”–or an average death rate of four islanders and three outsiders a year. Even if the death toll in hostilities has been greatly exaggerated in early histories, it is true that the island population suffered a drastic reduction during this period–not because of warfare, but because of the deadly epidemics that were almost a yearly event. The pre-contact population of an estimated 40,000 plunged to 4,000 by 1710, the year of the first census. In just over forty years the population of the Marianas had been reduced by 90 percent.[[5]](#footnote-4) This near-extermination of the local population was a tragedy that had occurred repeatedly in those lands colonized by Spain where people had not yet developed the immunity to diseases that the visitors inadvertently transmitted through their contact.

*Resettlement of the Survivors*

Local people, once scattered in small hamlets throughout the island, were starting to be resettled into central villages as early as 1680 during a lull in the hostilities. The practice of *reducción*, a trademark of Spanish colonial administration everywhere, was intended to do more than just provide administrators and missionaries ready access to the people. It was to offer local people the blessing of *cristianidad*, the faith community that provided regular liturgical celebrations, instructions in their religion, and the social support needed to sustain the belief of these new converts.

The consolidation of the surviving Chamorro population was a process that continued for half a century, concluding only when the last of the people from Saipan moved to Guam in the early 1730s. Thereafter, the ten northern islands of the archipelago remained uninhabited for more than a century, while the entire population was concentrated on the large island of Guam and the nearby island of Rota at the southernmost end of the chain. Guam was divided into six *partidos*, each consisting of a resettlement village together with its surrounding land; Rota had just one.[[6]](#footnote-5)

*Village Life*

The village consisted of a church and rectory surrounded by a cluster of dwellings, most of them built of nipa thatch. Except for Hagatna, which had been designated the capital and dignified by the term *ciudad*, the villages had 200 or 300 residents. Some of the houses once scattered along the shore were rebuilt in orderly rows; roads were widened and straightened. Besides the dwellings and the nearby sheds that served as cookhouses, there might be a few large canoe houses lining the shore. The young men’s clubhouses that formerly were found in most villages had been destroyed at the insistence of the missionaries, who regarded them as little more than dens of promiscuity.

Local people supported themselves, as they always had, by subsistence farming and fishing. They spent much of their time on their ancestral estates–or in the case of those resettled from other islands, on the lands the Spanish had given them to farm–growing rice and taro and the other usual root crops. (The practice of regular work visits to these land parcels, known as *lanchu*, remained a strong feature of island life right up to modern times.) But their crops included popular items such as corn, newly introduced by the Spanish, while the domestic animals they raised now included chickens, cows and especially caribou. The caribou became a trademark of village life in the Marianas, where until World War II it was used as a beast of burden and sometimes eaten as a feast food. In 1698, one missionary listed among the food items traded to visiting Spanish ships “pigs, calves, watermelons, bananas, pineapples, sweet potatoes and melons as good as those in Spain.”[[7]](#footnote-6) Tobacco, however, soon became the central commodity in the island economy and the most common medium of exchange as the entire population, young and old, took up the habit of smoking pipes and cigars. “For one leaf of tobacco,” a Jesuit wrote, “a man will work all day.”[[8]](#footnote-7)

In addition to their traditional work, women now spent much of their time weaving the cloth that was in such great demand to make the simple clothing worn by everyone in the village. While clothing was imposed by the priests, village people dispensed with it when they were not in church or engaged in religious activities. On the other hand, clothing had an appeal for some villagers, who used it as a bodily adornment or to display their religious devotion. As clothes became more commonly worn, women acquired one more task: laundering the family clothing. This they did in the company of other family members or neighbors so that it became something of a social event.

Authority in the new village remained with the traditional village chief. Under Governor Saravia, who began the resettlement in 1680, the legitimacy of their authority was recognized by Spanish officials and village chiefs were given the title *maestre de campo.* At first this worked well, but later, under a string of governors who were notoriously avaricious, most of the village chiefs requested that the governor find someone to replace them. Understandably, they found it difficult to comply with the harsh demands for village labor–demands that far exceeded what was permitted by Spanish law and would do little more than enrich the governor. These self-serving governors–Damian Esplana, Juan Antonio Pimentel and Luis Tagle–ruled for a total of 25 years between 1683 and 1725. During those hard years, the governors were able to get what they wanted by appointing a creole or Filipino, usually a retired soldier, as *mayordomo* to exercise *de facto* authority over the village.[[9]](#footnote-8) After the last of this string of governors left office, the added title was eliminated and authority returned to the traditional village chief.

*The Village Church*

The church building, which stood at the center of the village, became even more prominent as the old wooden structures were rebuilt in stone. As in other parts of the Spanish empire, village life in the Marianas soon came to be regulated by the church bells. They tolled for mass in the morning, for rosary in the afternoon, three times a day for the *Angelus*, and the *De Profundis* at the death of anyone in the community. The whole village would turn out for mass on special religious feasts recognized throughout the year. But the feast day of the patron saint of the village church was celebrated with extraordinary aplomb: on this special occasion the procession and the feast that invariably followed drew crowds from other villages on the island. Within a short time, the church determined not only the order of the day, but the yearly calendar as well.

The Jesuit missionaries described with evident satisfaction the devotional practices among their newly converted island people. In Hagatna, one missionary helper marveled, women would meet in the church to sing their prayers every evening, “with some of the prayers beginning at 7 o’clock, some at 8, and some at 9. Music could even be heard at 10 in the evening.”[[10]](#footnote-9) Young people may have no longer chanted aloud their creation myths, but boys and girls would sing the litanies in harmony as they romped through the hills or worked in the fields. In the church that had just become central to village life, there was a rich variety of outlets through which people could express their musical talent: parish choirs, chanted prayers and sung devotions.

Right from the outset the converts to Christianity displayed a strong affection for Mother Mary, missionary letters report, “with many hugging the statue in church and praying the rosary while walking or at home.”[[11]](#footnote-10) This devotion, so quickly elevated to a central place in people’s practice of their faith, may reflect the importance of women’s nurturing role in the island society. In the new church they continued to play the prominent role they had in their pre-contact village community. Even if the main authority figure in the church was the foreign pastor, select women became recognized in their role as *techa*, or teacher. Always more than simply catechism instructors, these reliable women became the heart of the parish, signs of stability, and decision-makers in the life of the church. In effect, women soon acquired in the new church a role that would have been similar to the one they enjoyed in traditional society.

*Confronting the Spirits*

Traditional island life embraced a network of social relationships that included people’s bonds with the unseen spirits that were believed to exercise control over so much of what happened in the village. The spiritual dimension was as critical in traditional village life as it was church-centered new village.

Island culture placed huge emphasis on respect for the dead and veneration of ancestral spirits. The skulls of deceased family members, mentioned so often in the old missionary accounts, served as shrines to their spirits.[[12]](#footnote-11) The bones of beloved family members were cleaned and kept in caves where they were honored and sometimes consulted through spirit mediums. Missionaries inveighed against this practice, destroying ancestral skulls whenever they could on the grounds that they were sacrilegious. Yet, the church offered alternative means of honoring the dead. The early Jesuit missionaries mention the sung funeral masses in the parish churches and describe the line of acolytes and clergy accompanying the casket, “draped in black cloth stitched with crosses,” to the cemetery for religious burial in a grave blessed with holy water. Already by 1698, the people in the village had begun the custom of gathering nightly to recite the rosary for anyone who had recently died in the village.[[13]](#footnote-12) This celebrated custom of the novena, with the rosary recited each evening by a gathering of the family and friends, was not unlike the traditional island wake, which might extend to seven or eight days. The mourners would “spend those days singing sad sons and having funeral meals around the mound they raise over the grave.”[[14]](#footnote-13)

Besides the ancestral spirits venerated by the islanders, there were also the harmful nature spirits that had to be dealt with. In place of the traditional remedies, usually dispensed by spirit mediums to ward off the power of malevolent spirits, the church offered a wealth of symbolic means for affording protection. When an island leader found that rats were attacking the crops, he was instructed to raise a cross in the middle of the field after it had been blessed with holy water.[[15]](#footnote-14) The missionary reports at this time (1690) are filled with stories of how people sought protection from malevolent spirits under the new religion. “The sick began drinking holy water... to ward off death and aid recovery. A cross could be found in just about every house since it was revered as a means of protection against diabolical powers and other evils.”[[16]](#footnote-15) Erecting a cross, drinking holy water against disease, and receiving priestly blessings were among the various means of protection offered to the newly converted people.

All of this exemplified the growing belief that the new religion offered even more powerful resources than the old for protecting people against harmful spirits, just as it provided adequate alternative forms for honoring the spirits of the deceased.

*Missionaries and Opposing Forces*

The battle for souls, in the minds of the early missionaries, was fought against the superstitious beliefs and the lascivious customs of the islanders they sought to convert. In fact, during the earliest years of their work in the Marianas, the opposition the missionaries faced was from islanders they had angered for one reason or another. In the ambushes and skirmishes that occurred time and again during those years, twelve Jesuits died violent deaths. Twenty of the 31 lay helpers who accompanied the first band of Jesuits also lost their lives in the on-going hostilities. Yet, they were easily replaced, and the number of Jesuits assigned to the mission grew to fourteen by 1680. The risk of violent death in the islands, far from deterring volunteers, encouraged them, for the Marianas had the same appeal to those Jesuits seeking martyrdom that the French mission in the New World did. As reports of the Marianas mission began to circulate throughout Europe, the missionary band in the islands became more cosmopolitan as it grew in size. Within a few years of its founding, Dutch and Sicilian Jesuits arrived; and soon Bohemians, Austrians and Italians were added to the mix. In fact, the Jesuit who served the longest in the islands–48 years–was Brother Jacopo Chavarri, a Neapolitan by birth.

Because of the early opposition the missionaries encountered, the Spanish government sent troops to protect the missionaries and appointed a civil governor to administer the growing garrison. The number of troops, most recruited on board the galleons, expanded by 1680 from twenty to 130. The Jesuits, who were at first happy to have these reinforcements to protect their vulnerable new mission, soon were complaining about the excesses of these troops. Besides the sexual liberties the soldiers were taking with local women, they were using their position to seize whatever else they wanted from local people. One Jesuit complained, “The thefts that the soldiers have carried out among the *Indios*, and the other extortions, have been endless.”[[17]](#footnote-16) But the troops themselves were becoming impoverished as their numbers increased and their salary diminished. In the end, the troops would continue to be exploiters just as they were exploited by their own authorities.

If the military operated independently of the mission and its goals, the same could be said of the civil governors. A few of the governors shamelessly exploited their troops and the local people to make their own fortunes. Three of the governors–Esplana, Pimentel and Tagle–were especially notorious for their corruption, as the documents of that time attest. In their attempt to gain control of as much of the annual subsidy as they could to invest in the galleon trade, these governors would find reason to reduce salaries even as they marked up food items in the government store by as much as 500 percent.[[18]](#footnote-17)

As the church took root and early local resistance all but ended, the missionaries found other forces at work to hinder their efforts. Ironically, the new opposition they faced as the mission matured was from the very people who had been posted to the islands to protect them and safeguard their work.

*Period of Tranquility*

By 1730, the mission had acquired a certain measure of stability. With new reforms introduced to correct administrative abuses, the soldiers were paid their salary in cash and the harsh work demands on the islanders were relaxed. A pastor was appointed for each of the villages and church life could be carried on without the drama of the recent years. The mission schools, begun a year after the arrival of San Vitores, educated a steady stream of young boys and girls in matters of faith and in the basic skills they would need to interact with their expanded world in the future. Besides the *Colegio de San Juan de Letran* and *Escuela de las Ninas,* the Jesuits operated an agricultural school on farmland in the village of Pago where students learned different trades as they cared for the missionaries’ livestock and crops.[[19]](#footnote-18)

The population of the island group had stabilized at about 2,000, with most of the local people peacefully residing in the villages that had been designated for resettlement. While the church might have remained central to the life of the village, it did not exercise full control over the lives of the villagers. Many of the village people had family estates in the interior, known as *lancho*. They would split their time between their residence and their estate, some returning to town only for Sunday services.

At different times civil authorities in the Marianas, witnessing the population plummet and the cost to the Crown of maintaining this colony, recommended a drastic solution: one governor proposed that the Spanish simply abandon the island group and the entire population be relocated in the Philippines.[[20]](#footnote-19) The Jesuits, of course, objected strenuously to such proposals, which would have ended the mission that they had nurtured with their own blood. In this they were supported by the Spanish Crown, which resolved to maintain the colony as a defensive outpost for Spanish shipping if for no other reason.

Life had settled down in the islands to the point of tedium. There was little excitement other than the arrival of the yearly galleon; mission letters were merely a recital of marriages and deaths and favors granted. The one bit of glitter in the otherwise dreary procession of years were the festivities celebrated in 1747 at the coronation of King Ferdinand VI; the description of the event filled page after page of the Spanish reports. Yet, at bottom, the silence and tedium were reassuring, for they served notice that the colonization of the island group was completed; Spain and the people of the Marianas had learned to live with one another in peace.[[21]](#footnote-20)

*End of an Era*

Jesuit work in the Marianas came to an abrupt end in 1769, shortly after Spain banished Jesuits from its realm. The banishment by Spain, soon after similar decrees by Portugal and France, was part of a widespread reaction to the Jesuit Order that resulted in its universal suppression by the Pope a few years later. With the expulsion of Jesuits, who had initiated and staffed the evangelical mission for 101 years, the church in the Mariana Islands was entrusted to the Augustinian Recoletos in the Philippines. They would assume responsibility for the mission until nearly the end of the 19th Century, when Spain ceded its title to the Marianas to other powers.

During the century of Jesuit work in the island group, a total of 74 Jesuits served in the mission. Half of them ended their lives there. The Jesuits had begun their work alone, without the usual colonial and military personnel that were normally a part of such mission attempts. But they had the assistance of a varied group of laymen as they went about their work. This band of helpers over the years included a few remarkable figures such as Jose Quiroga, an experienced soldier who led a austere life and provided long service to the mission. They had endured the trials of the first two decades to see the people they served settle into the peaceful Christian life they had always intended for them. Their successors, the Recoletos, would minister to a people who would see waves of new visitors, presenting additional cultural challenges, wash over their islands during the following century.

*The Impact of the Church*

The conversion of an island people San Vitores initially viewed as peaceful and well disposed to the faith turned out to be far from the simple task he imagined. His attempt to bring the blessings of the gospel precipitated cultural conflict that soon turned violent. That, in turn, led to Spanish retaliation once the military force and the administrative apparatus was expanded sufficiently to allow for this. Hence, the pathway to conversion in the Marianas, as in so many other parts of the world, was through conquest and colonization. In the end, the island group had lost most of its people to disease, the survivors had nearly all become Catholic and were resettled in a handful of villages, and the culture in the Marianas had been greatly transformed. The faith had been planted in the islands, as the missionaries envisioned, but the human damage was undeniable and the cultural disruption was real.

Even as the church became the center of village life, it continued to introduce major new features. It enforced obligatory standards of dress, established a new daily order that revolved around church devotions, created religious organizations that quickly evolved into social groups, provided a host of occasions for village fiestas, and altered the ways in which islanders dealt with the spirits. The church could do all this more forcefully than it could in earlier years, if only because each village now had a resident pastor.

But if the church was an instrument of cultural disruption, it also served as a vehicle for maintaining many of the elements of pre-contact island life. With its complex liturgical and devotional system, church life provided the villagers with a host of opportunities to display many of the cultural features that had once been so important in their traditional social life. Among the most prominent ones absorbed into the church were: the love of music, opportunities for feasting, village gatherings, celebration of the dead and placation of malevolent spirits. These cultural features may have been expressed in new forms–those supplied by the church–but the features themselves carried on through the years. Hence, the flavor of much of the traditional society lived on, even if now embedded in an organization that was expressly religious.

The church also had a unifying effect on the people. Membership in the church provided a new relationship that brought villagers together more strongly than ever before, whatever their birthplace and lineage. The outreach of the church extended beyond the village to other parts of the island, and even to other distant islands. As would later happen elsewhere in the Pacific, the church served as an instrument of unification since it offered extended “kinship” ties well beyond what the customary clan could provide. Perhaps we might say, then, that the church, despite the turbulence it provoked, did accomplish at least part of what evangelization was intended to achieve: the pacification of the islands.

Overall, the church could be said to represent both a force for change and a medium of continuity. Hence, it was the seed of the process that would result in a new shape of the island and its culture.

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***Notes***

1. . Garcia 2004: 140-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. . Viana 2004 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. . Coomans 1997: 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. . Garcia 2004: 184 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. . Hezel 2015: 79-81 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. . Hezel 2000: 27 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. . Anonymous Jesuit, 19 Sept 1698, *Revista Militar*, vol 2 (Manila 1885), 66; cited in Atienza & Hezel 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. . Strobach, Report on the Mariana Island Mission, 1682, AGI Filipinas 562, ff 352-3. See also Hezel 2000: 17-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. . AGI Filipinas 99, f33; cited in Atienza 2014: 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. . Bustillo, Annual report for 1689-1690, ARSJ Filipinas 14, ff 75-83 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. . Cardenoso, letter of 1693, ARSJ Filipinas 14, ff83-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. . Garcia 2004: 194 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. . “Puntos para la carta annua,” 1698, RAH, Cortes 567, leg 12; cited in Hezel 2000: 20 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. . Garcia 2004: 174; Coomans 1997: 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. . Bustillo, 23 May 1690, ARSJ Filipinas 14, ff 400-1 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. . Hezel 2000: 20 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. . Solorzano, 20 May 1681 (source given in Levesque VII, 440ff) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. . Quiroga, 26 May 1720, AGI, Filipinas 95, f 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. . Bustillo, 23 May 1690, ARSJ Filipinas 14, ff 75-83 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. . Bustillo, 14 April 1702, ARSJ Filipinas 14, ff 324-5; Hezel 2000: 47 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
21. . Hezel 2000: 52 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)