***The Changing Face of the Marianas***

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The Marianas may be considered more of a backwater than a crossroads–eg, Fred Kluge’s latest novel, *Master Blaster*–but there is a good case to be made for the opposite. Just look around at the faces, the genealogical record, and the history of the group.

Years ago, long before the DNA mystery was being solved, I remember reading articles suggesting a close relationship between the Marianas and Taiwan (of all places). It was not so much mitrochondrial DNA, but bone structure, ear wax, blood types and such things that pointed in that direction. Linguistics later confirmed what the physical anthropologists had been telling us–that Taiwan (not the Americas by way of a raft) was the homeland of the Pacific peoples. Today Taiwanese are celebrating their kin ties with all of the Pacific and exploiting them for political purposes–ties that their Han rivals in mainland China do not enjoy.

But was China really left out of the picture altogether? Do we really believe that the notorious Choco, the castaway who was said to be spreading stories that the water missionaries poured on the heads of infants was killing them, was the only Chinese who ever lived for any time in the Marianas?

Let’s turn to the 18th century. We often speak of Hispanization of the Marianas when we should really say the Philippinization. Spanish culture, more often than not, came by way of the Philippines and the people from the island group colonized a century before the Marianas. Filipino military working for the Spanish, often settled into the society and married the local women. They couldn’t have returned to the Philippines even if they wanted since they were dirt poor. In 1680 there were 40 salaried positions for close to 120 soldiers, so each one was receiving about one-third of the regular salary. Thirty years later, the number of positions had been increased to 60, but the troops by then had increased to nearly 170, so each was still getting one-third of the normal salary. Since their clothing allotment was withdrawn due to the financial pinch, they either had to buy clothes at highly inflated prices from the government store or else beg clothes from the mission. No wonder they were described as a ragtag lot, barefoot and shirtless.

Those former soldiers who settled in became *alcaldes* or “mayors” of the villages after the reduction of the population. With the help of their wives and their in-laws, they organized the efforts to raise local taxes for the governor–usually in the form of food that could be sold to visiting ships. Many of those Spanish names in the Marianas–the Castros, and Sablans, and Cruzes–were bestowed by Filipinos, who had themselves just taken Spanish names some years earlier. So when we so glibly speak of the Spanish influence on the Marianas, let’s not forget that middle step in the process–and the blood that came with those Spanish-sounding names by way of the Philippines.

It wasn’t long before the Spanish were tempted to give up on their island possession. It was remote, expensive to maintain, and the population small. Someone suggested that the entire population be brought by galleon to the Philippines and integrated into that colony. (I’m proud to say that the Jesuit superior of the mission objected strenuously to this plan.) But all such proposals were brushed aside because the island group served as a bastion against English and Dutch pirates. If the Spanish abandoned the island chain, the pirates might use it as a base for their attacks on the yearly galleons. In other words, the “backwater” had the advantage of “strategic location” even then.

But would the little colony forever depend on the yearly government subsidy? Numerous attempts were made to build a viable industry for the little colony, but one after another they all failed. A ship bringing 100 Filipino families to the island in 1748 to help revolutionize agriculture sank. Then Chinese were to be brought in to develop a cotton industry, but this, too, came to naught. The accounts of the governors through the century are filled with desperate plans to spark the island economy, but nothing worked. Does any of this sound familiar? So the government subsidy kept coming–at least in those years when the annual ship came to port.

On to the 19th century. By this time the strategic location wasn’t so much military as it was commercial. The Marianas, like most other parts of Micronesia, straddled the shipping lanes from the US to China–and the China trade was lucrative back then. Added to this was the fact that the Marianas was close to some of the best whaling grounds in the world. So along came the deserters from whaleships and the dropouts from the China trade. Toward the end of the century, the copra traders followed. This meant the arrival of European and American traders, not Spaniards but people with names like Hofschneider and Fleming. Men who had carried on commercial operations in the Marianas, took local wives, and lent their own names and genes to several generations of descendants down to our own day. The population of the archipelago may not have been growing very much, but the population was becoming ever more diverse and the blood more mixed.

Carolinians had started visiting the Marianas in the early 18th century, if not before, but returned to settle on Saipan in the second half of the 19th century. Chamorros were encouraged to settle there also, if only to “civilize” the Carolinians. The ethnic groups lived separately for a time with clearly delineated boundaries between their settlements–even up to the post-war years. But in time there was intermarriage, common betelnut use, and once again the outsider became domesticated.

The 20th century saw a great deal of population movement. Japanese and Okinawan settlers, including sugar workers and others, began arriving in the islands not long after the Japanese takeover here. By the start of the Pacific war, there was a foreign population of well over 20,000 on Saipan alone. Some of the sugar farmers for Nanyo Kohatsu Kaisha brought their own families, while others acquired the families after they arrived. In either case, they made their mark here.

The Japanese may not have stayed–in fact, they were forbidden to do so–but Americans took their place, even if not in such large numbers. Contract teachers, Peace Corps Volunteers, Trust Territory administrators, civil servants, and businessmen spilled over Capitol Hill into new settlements on the islands. Many of them fell in love with the place, with some of them marrying (or remarrying) here. Chief Hamilton may have been one of the first, but there were many after him who created a permanent legacy in the islands.

Since then there have been others added to the mix. Chinese, former workers in the garment factories, who have somehow managed to remain even after the factories closed. Filipinos who have been rapidly filling out the work force since the expansion of the 1980s, with some serving as housemaids and helping raise children. (Here we might not that women may have been conspicuously absent from the Filipino population in the Marianas during the 18th century, but they certainly aren’t today.) Then, too, there are other Asian peoples–from Korea, Bangladesh, Vietnam–even if intermarriage seems to be much rarer among these peoples.

So here we are today, the Marianas as much of a crossroads as ever before. The island group remains an advance base, as those Navy supply ships off the coast remind us. But also a blend of blood and brains from different places, all contributing to the social puree in these islands.

The “native” of the Marianas today is a lot like a computer, a smartphone, or any piece of electronic equipment. The frame may be made in one place, the chips in another, wired somewhere else, and the whole product labeled USA. Likewise for the people of this archipelago. The certification may come from the Marianas, but the product is built from a little bit of this and a little bit of that. Even so, we’d like to believe that the population, like the phone or notebook, works well.

May I suggest, then, that we resist any temptation to narrow our focus to an ideal or “pure” form of Chamorro culture or history. That would be a mistake, not simply because it cuts so many contributing ethnic groups out of the story, but because it is doomed to frustration. In the end, those many faces of the Marianas will not be denied because of the key contributions they have made to Chamorro history and even culture. There is no mistaking the distinctive pattern that defines the people as Chamorro, but many peoples have added their distinctive bit to the composition.

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