***Setting an Agenda: Quilting the Patches and Stitching them Together***

Marianas History Conference, Keynote Address, June 2012

*“One Archipelago, Many Stories” is the theme of the conference*

• This is always the case with history. We stitch together and compare many stories from different perspectives to get what we call “history.”

• Different perspectives are always important: eg, history of Buffalo varies depending on where you stand–German family, Polish on the East Side, Italians on the West Side.

• History is always a composite. It must take account of many different sub-populations. It’s no longer the tale of the kings and presidents, national leaders, but their people as well: what has come to be called “social history.”

• Recent example: At Yap Homecoming Festival the island group recognized the contribution of Chamorros to the colonial history from the Spanish era in which people from the Marianas were brought to Yap to work as administrators and teachers over a 70 year period.

*But the reverse of this theme is also true: “One story (history), many islands”*

• Marianas Archipelago shared a common settlement, common language and culture, and most of its social and political history–at least until Spanish-American War.

• If the archipelago shares so much, it’s time to gather our forces from both sides of the Guam-CNMI divide, formed in 1899 and deepened since then by different colonial experiences and by the feelings engendered during WW II.

• It’s time to work together to fill in the blanks in the historical record and construct a richer and deeper picture of the past. Then, of course, to present it to the people we serve. These are the two goals I would like to address briefly in this keynote talk of mine. [This is not to belittle the enormous work already done–there are plenty of splendid examples. It’s just to say that there is always more to do.]

• History is a little like quilt-making. Some of us work to make the splendid patches–the place of Spanish ovens in the islands, the story of the Macabebes (the pro-Spanish troops from the Philippines), the whaleship trade in Guam in the early 19th century. Others stitch these together into a patterned quilt. The result is what we call history.

*The agenda for Marianas history*

• The first of two items on my own agenda is to fill in the blanks. The second–addressing our people–I intend to address at the very end of this presentation.

• “Filling in the blanks” can mean two different things: first, addressing gaps in the historical record and using whatever means at our disposal to offer an understanding of what has happened in these times periods; and second, canvassing for stories from various sub-communities from their own stockpile so that those on the “East Side” and the “West Side” are fairly represented.

• In our historical work in the future we will have to set priorities for ourselves, with an eye to exploring those periods and gathering information on those groups about which we know very little at present.

• To accomplish this, we will need all the resources at hour disposal, large and small: linguistic studies, archaeological reports (including even the site studies that have been done in connection with recent construction of hotels and the like), stories that grandma told about life 60 years ago, and so much more. Anything can help, let me assure you.

• Each of us has an individual role to play in gathering these resources, but it’s time for us to collaborate much more closely to achieve a more ambitious goal: offer people a deeper understanding of their past. If we hope to do this, we’re going to have to work together to do it.

• Understanding of the past underscores the identity of a people. This is all the more urgent as the speed of social change accelerates–as it surely has in CNMI and Guam–and as the ethnic composition of the population becomes more varied. This, too, has happened throughout the Marianas.

*Examples of gap-filling*

• Years ago, I remember wondering when we were ever going to get beyond the early mission period and the so-called Spanish-Chamorro wars–a period that had been written about repeatedly–and find out what happened to people after the reduction of the population in 1700 as the new Spanish colony settled down. So I looked through boxes at MARC that contained Spanish documents from the early 1700s and found all kinds of interesting things: how the Spanish governors got hold of the subsidy so they could invest in the Manila galleon trade and get rich; how Filipino troops married local women and became the village authorities, collecting taxes for the governor; how most people were dirt poor at the time, not least of all the soldiers; etc. The result of this collaboration between MicSem and MARC was a monograph that was published by CNMI HPO. It attempted to fill the gap between 1700 and 1740, a critical time for the colony.

• Then there was Scott Russell’s contributions on the early Carolinian settlements on Saipan, that pieced together oral tradition with documentation from the period to give us a richer understanding of how the Carolinian community grew in the northern islands.

• Not too long ago Carlos Madrid did research on the deportees from the Philippines and Spain that became such a prominent part of history in the late 19th century. This led to a book that deepened the understanding of Guamanians and people of the Northern Marianas on their past.

• Not everything needs to result in a book or monograph. Tony Ramirez’s work in compiling an exhibit on Chamorros in Yap sparked interest everywhere, including in Yap itself, on this facet of their history. The archaeologists in our midst have been working for years to try to present a view of life in the islands before the arrival of the Westerner. Rlene Steffy has been scouring Guam, village by village, to do mini-histories of the major settlements on the island.

• We can all do this sort of thing. We need to frame our questions, share with one another the materials available to find answers, and so fill the gaps.

*Where do we begin in filling in the gaps?*

• I can only offer examples here. Understand that these are questions that have been explored many times before, to the credit of those who have done the hard work involved and others who have popularized what we know. But there is clearly more work to be done in these areas–so much, in fact, that this work demands all the collaboration we can muster.

• You are invited to add your own “blanks” to the list at different times in this conference and afterwards.

1) Ancient History

Who are these ancestors of ours? Where did they come from? Why did they come to these islands? How did they live? What are the earliest settlements in the archipelago? What can we infer about the way in which they spread throughout the islands? What plants and animals did they bring with them? Can we track the changes in food cultivation and animal life over the centuries?

Can we summarize in lay terms what we know from archaeological, linguistic and physiological evidence? Are we ready to draw inferences from bits of evidence to paint the bigger picture?

2) Precontact Times

What were the patterns of social organization before the Spanish entered the scene? What do we know about village life? What were the belief systems that guided Chamorros at this time?

What were the principles of political organization in the archipelago? Villages forming temporary alliances with one another? Was the village founded on ranked matrilineages, as in Chuuk and other islands in Micronesia? Or was there a stratified political system accompanied by the so-called “caste system” that Spanish observers thought they saw? What models from other island groups might be used to suggest possible social systems that may have been operative in the archipelago?

What do we know of the traditional religion? Was the veneration paid to ancestral skulls in the Marianas similar to the old practices found in Kiribati? What do we know of the spirit world?

3) 19th Century

We have plenty of facts, mostly observations of outsiders who came to visit. But how do we get beyond the facts to get a sense of how people lived?

Social history of Guam after 1817, the opening of the island to other nations. We know of the arrival of whaleships, the appointment of a non-Spanish port captain, and other events during this period. But what was daily life in the village like for the people?

What was the impact of deportees from Spain and the Philippines on the society during the last 30 years of the century. Thanks to the work of Carlos Madrid and others, we know the main facts of the era. But did this change the course of events in the Marianas in any way?

Resettlement of Chamorros on the northern islands, especially Saipan. How was this initiated and for what reason? What was the impact on the Carolinians who had already begun moving to the islands? How much intermingling was there between Carolinian and Chamorro people during the end of the 19th century and the years following? Was there a two-tier society that directly resulted from this? How did this influence German policies when they took over from the Spanish?

4) 20th Century

I’m not sure what the gaps are in our knowledge of this period. (But the program for this conference offers us many good leads.) Can we help one another with this? These are a few suggestions.

What was the impact of the political separation of Guam from the rest of the Marianas on social history during the early years of the 20th century? How did this affect families with branches in both places?

How has the breakdown of the homogeneous village system, a long mainstay in both CNMI and Guam, affect community spirit, the ways of handling village problems, and law and order in the islands? How did it affect the role of the village commissioner or mayor?

*Product for the People*

• In the end history is for the people–not just the archaeologists and historians. History is supposed to give people a deeper understanding of themselves. In finding our roots, we discover ourselves. (Example: my aunt and her stories about the German neighborhood in Buffalo)

• But not everyone has an aunt who commits her memories to paper to help us construct a personal history. Even if they do, what about the Poles and the Italians who were part of a city that once was a national treasure even if it has faded considerably since then?

• History needs quilt-makers, those who stitch together squares of cloth to form a patterned coverlet. Someone has to make sense of all the findings from those excavation sites and other studies. Don’t let postmodernism and its warnings against one definitive history scare you off. Work on the individual squares if you want, but understand that they ought to be passed on to others who can blend them into a quilt of some sort. To change the metaphor, we can see the historical enterprise as assembling a building of Lego-blocks. The blocks are important–nothing can be built without them. But they can be best displayed as part of a whole, a building that someone has put together as a showpiece. Let others rearrange them afterwards, as they will do in any case, but give them something to work with–a model that they can alter as needed in the future. Bear in mind the comment of Gavin Daws, the author of *Shoals of Time*, the popular history of Hawaii published over 40 years ago: “History needs to be rewritten every generation.” Why? New sources become available, new themes emerge, and finally a new audience with their own interests and questions must be addressed.

• Products are important. Great work has been done on textbooks offering local history and culture. Textbooks are critical, but they’re not the only means we have for educating people. What about presentations to adults in media that they can understand and enjoy? We could use films (as MicSem tried to do with the history of the region), but pamphlets can also serve this purpose. Dioramas in museums can be good teaching tools. Other things?

• History always ends in presentation to the people so that they can deepen their own self-understanding, their understanding of themselves as a people. If history starts with curiosity about the past, it ends in service to our people.

Francis X. Hezel, SJ