***What Is It: Fairy Tales or History?***

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*Once upon a time, there was a people living in an island group. There were many, many people–perhaps a hundred thousand of them. They lived contentedly on their islands until one day a ship anchored off their island. Ships had visited their islands before, but this ship was different because it brought people from the outside who intended to stay on the island.*

*There weren’t very many of these people–not even forty of them altogether–but they had scary weapons. Soon these people scattered throughout the islands telling the island people they wanted to help them. But instead a long war broke out that lasted 30 or 40 years. When it was over, most of the island people were killed. And those who survived were forced to shed their customs, wear clothes and obey the new conquerors of their islands.*

Is this history or a fairy tale? A version of this is found in the first histories of the Marianas that I read back in the 60s and 70s: Paul Carano, Charles Beardsley, among others. Something close to this version is still being perpetuated in some circles even today.

But there are plenty of unanswered questions:

1. How did forty people conquer an island group with a gigantic population? The weapons must have been really powerful. Or perhaps the newcomers were a super-race?
2. What were the island people thinking when they let these newcomers on their island in the first place? Why did they let them stay?
3. Is it possible that many of the island people joined the newcomers? Then, too, could it be that some of the newcomers joined the island people?
4. Were there reasons for welcoming the newcomers? Is it possible that perhaps the newcomers really did help the island people despite the many deaths?

Let’s put aside for the moment any talk of “discourses” and “narratives” and try to figure out what we know (or think we know). Long past time to begin serious historic exploration into the events surrounding the arrival of Padre San Vitores and his party in 1668–six Jesuits and 31 lay missionaries. This is significant for the rest of the Pacific as well as the people of the Marianas. After all, it was the first lasting Western incursion into the island Pacific.

What do we know? We know that the original island population was reduced to 4,000 by 1710–42 years later and that the Spaniards were in charge. So what happened to bring about this upheaval?

We have three major tools to work out the history:

1. Oral history (if any accounts survive)
2. Spanish sources, mostly missionary, with a detailed account of what was happening (unless these are regarded as hopelessly biased)
3. Cultural features of nearby islands– for instance, understanding of mens house, use of skulls in traditional religious practices, nature of warfare waged, force of internal divisions, and motives that might have driven responses (unless the practice of island neighbors is judged irrelevant).

Because of time limitations, we can not sift through the historical evidence here. Let me simply present the conclusions offered in my monograph *When Cultures Clash: Revisiting the Spanish-Chamorro Wars*.

1. There were no troops with San Vitores, just Filipino and Mexicans chosen for their trade and their faith.
2. They brought three muskets and a few swords, but the muskets were not too useful in real encounters (especially in canoes, as the Filipinos and Mexicans soon found out).
3. Violence for the most part was provoked by cultural clashes and personal offense given, but of course they had a cumulative effect on the island people.
4. Guamanians could have easily wiped out the missionaries and their helpers if they had really wanted to do so. Three times they gathered in sufficient force outside the presidium in Hagatna: 1671, 1676 and 1685. (Muskets or not, the Spanish party was outnumbered 20 to one.)
5. Wiping out the opposition was not the way islanders conducted themselves. The normal pattern of warfare was a display of strength, perhaps loss of a couple lives, and then a settlement.
6. Mass slaughter would have defeated the purpose of the missionaries as well, since they were there to “save” the souls of the people, not to consign them to hell (according to the beliefs of the day).
7. But even if they had adopted European style warfare, the islanders would not have wiped out the newcomers for two reasons. First, they found something the foreigners offered that they wanted–not just their belief system and faith, but iron hoop, corn cultivation, cloth and weaving, etc. Second, the foreigners were already being protected by local allies (the men leading the local militia: Ignacio Hineti, Antonio Ayhi, Alonso So’on, Ignacio Nu-un). The divided polity in the Marianas and loosely organized village system gave rise to such divisions.
8. When troops finally were sent to the islands from the mid-1670s on, they were beset by their own problems: lack of training, poverty, disagreements with their officers. Many were outright useless. Some preyed on the local community, but more (about 60 by the end of the century) established links with the island community by marrying local women.
9. At the end of the period of intermittent hostilities (1668-1698), about 120 Chamorros had lost their lives in violence. (Perhaps 20 of these had been killed by their own people, the Spanish records indicate.). The foreigners had lost 60 or 70 people. The yearly death toll, then, was about 4 islanders and 2 foreigners over the 30-year period.
10. By 1700 a new cultural and political system was in place; this system was a combination of new and old. Examples that should be explored: titles and functions of village officials; alternation between town life and farming on the ranch; adoption of patrilineality along with the continuing importance of woman’s line; survival of the cultural place of death and honoring of deceased family through the church. This suggests that the new cultural forms included an altered form of the traditional rather than an abandonment of the old.

In the end, islanders did not simply roll over and play dead. Pacific historians have long taken up the cry to represent local people as real life figures, not just a faceless and feckless group that allowed outsiders to impose their will, regardless how ineffective their muskets were. On every page of the historical sources there are hints, sometimes outright screams, that people had good their own strategic responses to Spanish moves. Often enough they organized their own initiatives as well.

Perhaps it’s an injustice to present the people of these islands as helpless victims who have been deprived of what is most meaningful–their cultural heritage, their land and their identity. Can’t we do just a bit more to show how active and resilient they were? But to do so, we’ll have to give up some of our cherished myths. And we will have to develop the skill of reading between the lines to intuit what those who did not write the sources were trying to do.

If we believe in the agency of island people, let’s put our money where our mouth is. Explore the agency of those living in the complicated times four centuries ago. There’s a library full of wonderful Spanish materials just across the island. Why not begin there?

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