



Cultures of Commemoration: The Politics of War, Memory, and History in the Mariana Islands

Review by TODD AMES

Cultures of Commemoration: The Politics of War, Memory, and History in the Mariana Islands by Keith L. Camacho. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011. 280 pp. \$25.00.

This is an interesting work by Keith Camacho, (a Chamorro from the Marianna Islands himself), currently an Assistant Professor at UCLA. He approaches his project within the interdisciplinary approach of “memory studies” versus “history” (Camacho 10). The author makes the distinction early on that rather than memory and history being seen as oppositional, as suggested by Martha Sturken (c.f. Camacho 10), Camacho instead suggests that memory and history are “entangled”(Ibid.).

This direction of analyses leads the author to posit that in regards to Pacific Islanders’ remembrances of WWII, “one must consider that memory and history also function as processes that exert power in shaping how the past is constructed, represented, and interpreted.” (Ibid.).

This work employs three conceptual themes. The first is how culture works to create identification and differentiation (Ibid. 15). The second theme is to examine how colonialism works in such a way as to serve the needs of both colonized and colonizer (Ibid.16). The final main theme is that the author argues that people “actively engage in the remembrance and commemoration of the past (Ibid. 17)...that it is people who make history through their daily remembrance and interpretation of it.

Camacho begins his analyses with an account of the end of the Spanish American War and America’s acquisition of Guam from Spain. The author notes how, even before WWII, commemorative activities were instituted as a means to integrate the Chamorro into US values and culture – pre-war commemorative activities were held, notable were such examples as “Flag Day” (Ibid. 27), which celebrated the American presence on Guam and was used to highlight the American possession of Guam.

The author offers a comparative discussion of how, prior to WWII, both the Japanese in the Northern Marianas and the Americans in Guam worked to develop nationalist loyalties to their respective homelands among the Chamorros in each of the two areas. While neither the Japanese nor the Americans worked to truly integrate the Chamorros, the author notes that some Chamorros saw loyalty as a vehicle to achieving equality within the respective colonial administrations (Ibid. 37-38). In this vein the author continues as he notes that in the beginning of 1941, various activities such as advocating for citizenship, education, commemorative activities, and public holidays (among others), allowed the Chamorros of the Marianas to come to terms with the political systems of the Japanese and Americans respectively.

With the invasion of Guam by Japanese forces in December of 1941-coinciding closely with the attack on Pearl Harbor- previous American attempts to “Americanize” the Chamorro of Guam, through such devices as insisting that English be the lingua franca, were repeated by the Japanese in requiring locals to learn Japanese in their efforts to impose “Japanization” on the Chamorro of Guam, much as they had done to the Chamorro and Micronesians of the Northern Marianas, and the Carolinians of the Marshalls. For the Japanese colonizers it went far beyond simply educating Guamanian Chamorros about Japanese life and practices. Instead it also included the removal of 40 years (Ibid. 44) of American values, symbols, and beliefs. Despite these attempts at “Japanization” the author notes that brutal treatment was at times also meted out to the Guamanian Chamorros, which left them less receptive to the inculcation of Japanese values and beliefs. The types of treatments endured by the Guamanian Chamorros, included the execution of Chamorros who were uncooperative and the forcing of local women to become sex slaves. The biggest impediments to “Japanization” of Guam’s population were the racist attitudes that the Japanese held towards Pacific Islanders in general. Camacho’s accounts of resistance songs, songs that included calling for the return of Uncle Sam and American food items, illustrate how broadly resistance to “Japanization” on Guam was. Other songs were described as belittling Japanese food, or which described the Japanese as ugly, aptly illustrates some of the negatively romanticized views of the Japanese that prevailed among the Chamorro at the time. These resistance songs, according to Camacho’s work, became more strident and demeaning of the Japanese as the Japanese occupation grew more tiresome and aggressive.

With the advance of the American forces into the Western Pacific in early 1944, Japanese brutality continued to increase as evident in the 500 Chamorro (Ibid. 49) who were murdered on Guam following the American attack on Saipan. According to the author, this served to solidify any Chamorro resistance to “Japanization” and subsequently, the Chamorro never sought the status of being loyal Japanese subjects (as their counterparts in the Northern Marianas had done). These contrasting identities are certainly reflected in the author’s account given by Northern Marianna Chamorros, who described Americans as “killers” (Ibid. 52), versus the Guam Chamorros characterizations of Americans as “saviors” (Ibid. 52).

At the end of the WWII, the author describes how the experiences of the Chamorros in the Northern Marianas and those in Guam were diametrically opposed. This was especially true for those Chamorro who had worked for the Japanese as interpreters and police in the Northern Marianas. This was exacerbated by the perceptions that Northern Marianas Chamorro were “Japanized”. These differing perceptions lead to an interesting juxtaposition, which created opposing responses according to the author, of whether the Chamorro people were liberated, as they were in Guam, or in need of rehabilitation, as they were seen to be by the Americans in the Northern Marianas. Another interesting outcome of the war’s end, as the author notes, is that despite these perceptions and treatments of the Northern Marianas Chamorros, the Japanese military and civilians by far received the worst treatment at the hands of the Northern Marianas Chamorro and Carolinian Islanders. The author also notes, how in an interesting twist (Ibid. 73), with the American re-taking of Guam, and capture of the Northern Marianas, the Japanese (who assumed they were superior to all other peoples), found themselves at the bottom of the social ladder in these locals. Overall though, the author portrays a picture of favorable attitudes of the Chamorros towards the Americans (Ibid. 82).

Following the war, the author relates how “the interconnected nature of spirituality, identity, and nationality in post-war Guam” (Ibid. 89) was portrayed in the immediate post-war

Liberation Day celebrations, which placed a strong emphasis on religious interpretations of the outcome of the war and the Chamorra's involvement in the war.

The author also notes that following WWII, expressions in the form of celebrations at Liberations Day festivities on Guam created conflicts among younger generations (as exemplified in groups such as Nasion Chamorro – Chamorro Nation), which protested Liberation Day activities with placards and statements suggesting that liberation Day should be renamed “Occupation Day” (Ibid. 107). Older Chamorros were often very critical of the younger generation's attempts to reframe perceptions of the war and liberation, dismissing the younger generations as “boys” (Ibid. 108), who had not experienced the war and liberation that the older generations had.

Conversely, the author notes how “liberation” and “Liberations Day” are seen quite differently in the Northern Marianas. There celebrations for Liberation Day fall not on the American invasion date of Saipan - June 15, 1944 (Ibid. 110), but on the day that the Northern Marianas Chamorro were released from Camp Suspe (one of several internment camps where peoples in the Northern Marianas were placed following the American occupation of Saipan) on July 4th, 1946 (Ibid. 110).

This work suggests that the release of Chamorros from Camp Suspe on the historical date of July 4th may have been intended by the American authorities to foster a sense of American loyalty and patriotism (much as it did on Guam). However, the author points out that instead liberation commemorative events never generated the strong support that their counterparts did on Guam. One of the interesting transformations identified in this work that occurred following the war was the attempt in Saipan to refashion Saipan's Chamorros' wartime memories regarding the Americans as “peacetime humanitarians” rather than “wartime barbarians” (Ibid. 115).

An interesting side note to the history of post-war commemorative activities are the commemorative activities of the Japanese in erecting shrines to the war dead, and also in the collection of human remains which were usually cremated and then returned to Japan. This was done as a way to honor the dead, and also appease the souls of those who had not been treated properly after death. In an interesting twist similar to Japanese wartime beliefs about universal Japanese militancy and Japanese supremacy, all remains, whether military or civilian including Korean and Okinawans were treated as Japanese military remains. One account in the work even notes how one bone collecting mission on Tinian tried to bulldoze up a latte house site with plans to remove ancient Chamorro remains there, which were to be repatriated to Japan as Japanese military remains (Ibid.120).

This work finishes by looking at several other types of victims, some well-remembered, others less so. One such group are the women who were forced into sexual slavery, euphemistically referred to by the Japanese as “comfort women”. For Guamanian women, as noted in this work, some were tricked into being sexual slaves, while other feared for their own lives, or those of their families if they did not cooperate. Those who did not fully cooperate were often murdered. Other victims identified in this work were Chamorro who worked as interpreters or police for the Japanese, and were subsequently identified as collaborators. This work notes how in commemorative activities these two groups are largely ignored, for the women, due to the horror and shame of what had happened to them, for the collaborators for the shame of what they had done.

This work ends by noting the accounts of two individuals and what they are remembered for. The first is Father Duenas (a local Catholic Priest), who resisted the Japanese and attempts at Japanization of the local Catholic Church. Intertwined in Father Duenas' story is that of the American sailor George Tweed, who was hidden and assisted by Father Duenas (and others).

Tweed ended up eluding capture for four years on Guam. It is Camacho's contention that Tweed at the time was seen as a figure promising America's return and the Chamorros salvation from the Japanese, while Father Duenas has come to be seen as the spiritual caregiver and a resistance figure (Ibid. 165). Father Duenas is eventually murdered by the Japanese for refusing to reveal George Tweed's whereabouts. Father Duenas is fondly remembered today as the person who resisted the Japanese and saved George Tweed. Today his name is memorialized in the Father Duenas Memorial School, just a few blocks down the street from where I write this review. Whereas George Tweed is not memorialized partially due to the reprisals that befell those that helped him and partially due to his perceived lack of gratitude to those who helped him.

Camacho also briefly touches on some of the massacres and atrocities committed by the Japanese, without fully going into the details. Certainly the Manenggon Concentration Camp and the Massacre at Fena cave stand out as incidents, which continue to be commemorated. The site at Manenggon today has a memorial constructed there with annual memorials to those who suffered there and at Fena Cave. Several of my undergraduate students upon being queried, knew about Father Duenas and his role and most have visited the Manenggon Memorial and are aware of its significance.

After reading this work I was struck by how a singular event, WWII, can leave such a range of recollections and perceptions from patriotism and loyalty, to anti-colonial sentiments, to shame, to admiration, to horror. I cannot help but wonder what future generations' perceptions and constructions will be of WWII on Guam.

This masterful work by Camacho, as it entangles or untangles the interstices between history and memory, illustrates how recollections and commemorative events held to celebrate them can restructure people's perceptions as they make and re-make history over time. The one very minor drawback to this work is that within its rich narrative it does at times over rely on secondary analyses conducted by other authors on recollections of those involved. While offering a range of varying views by these other authors, in some cases it would be more interesting to have more first-hand accounts directly related in this work. Granted, this is only a minor drawback, and overall this monograph offers a rich collection of recollections of WWII and a poignant analyses of the making, re-making, and reinterpretation of history in the Mariana Islands through the Chamorro people's cultures of commemoration.

References

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