

War Magic among the Ancient Chamorros

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Abstract:

The Chamorros lived on the chain of islands known as the Mariana Islands in the western Pacific Ocean. The author argues that the ancient Chamorro religion and world view are based on a nondual cosmology of paired opposites that interact to generate a living world. The nondual cosmology is found throughout Micronesia. Religious beliefs and practices give expression to the nondual world view. This is especially true of the ancient Chamorros use of their ancestral skulls in warfare. The skulls were taken into battle against the Spanish. From the nondual world view the ancestors' power lives on through their descendants and is symbolically manifest in the skulls. After the Spanish Chamorro war, the survivors converted to Christianity and the ancient religion came to an end.

Keywords: Chamorro, *kakahna*, magic, nondual, religion, war magic.

In an attempt to not merely survive but also to flourish, humans must grapple with two perennial problems, namely threats from the environment and threats from fellow humans. As a creature who seeks value, meaning, significance and purpose in a symbolic framework, humans employ both evidence based, rational means and non-rational beliefs in their struggles with the environment and others. Over time the rational, evidence based methods developed into what is commonly known as science, and the non-rational beliefs are identified with what is called religion. It has been argued that non-rational beliefs support our attempts to ground science. For example, Lyotard (1989) argues that the principle of empirical investigation, namely that a proposition is true if and only if it can be empirically verified, cannot itself be empirically verified, and, therefore, must be accepted on belief. In some sense, then, non-rational beliefs or “magical thinking” continues to serve modern, technologically complex societies. In many ways modern humans continue to appeal to various forms of non-rational beliefs and magical thinking in our struggle with environmental threats and social conflict.

In this paper I examine the use of war magic among the ancient inhabitants of the Mariana Islands, known as the Chamorro people, in the western Pacific Ocean. Guam or Guahan (meaning “we have”) is the largest island in the western Pacific region known as Micronesia, sitting on the edge of the western Pacific and the eastern side of the Philippine Sea at 13.5 degrees North latitude and 144.7 degrees East longitude. The ancient Chamorro culture extended through the fifteen-island archipelago of the Mariana Islands, which reaches from Guam to Uracas Island at 20.5 degrees North latitude. Although all of the islands were not inhabited, they were used for resources. Because the term “magic” is loaded with pejorative connotations, I hesitate to use it without qualification. In this context magic does not refer to a stage show, slight-of-hand or other form of deception, illusion or trick, rather it is used to refer to both rational and non-rational beliefs and practices that are understood to be an effective and warranted means for obtaining desired results (Swain and Trompf, 1995, p. 147). In this sense magic is a hybrid mix of proto-science, medicine, and religion. These rational and non-rational practices and beliefs are used to cure or solve problems and conflicts brought on by the environment or people such as illness, natural disasters (floods, storms, famine, and so on), internal and external social conflicts. When internal and external social conflicts escalate to a serious degree of violence, such violence is commonly referred to as war.

Ancient Chamorro Religion and Nondual Thinking

To understand the world view of the ancient Chamorros and their use of magic allow me to briefly introduce my interpretation of their cosmology, which I argue is tied to nondual thinking. An important difference between the Euro-American and the Micronesian, especially the ancient Chamorros, cosmology is the Euro-American tendency to split the world into dualistic opposites or collapse the opposites into an overriding monism, while the Micronesian world, like most Pacific-Asian cultures, especially Indonesian, Malaysian, Filipino, and Japanese, is constructed on a bipolar nondual relationship obtaining between opposites. The tendency in the West, especially in Plato and Descartes, and in the religions of Manichaeism, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, is to separate reality into two opposite and opposing forces: good/evil; heaven/hell or heaven/earth; God/human; body/soul; true/false; and right/wrong. The problem with dualism is that once the world has been split into two parts, then the dualist attempts to explain how the parts fit back together again, how the two worlds connect, how the spiritual soul interacts with the material body, how the soul leaves the body and lives in another world (heaven) in an after-life.

The term “ancient Chamorro” is used to refer to the original inhabitants (*taotao tano* or *nusantao*) of the Mariana Islands; their culture was distinct from that of the modern Chamorro. The Micronesian and Chamorro world views are best described as nondual. The Micronesian and Chamorro cosmologies are not monisms. Monism proposes that the world is composed of one material substance or spiritual force. According to monism, plurality, the many, is either an illusion or reducible to the “One”. The Micronesian and Chamorro world views are not dualisms; the opposing forces are not separate. In the Micronesian world view opposites interact, interconnect, and interpenetrate into and through each other. The root of the nondual world view of Micronesia may have originated in Southeast Asia. In the Micronesian nondual world, life and death are intimately interconnected, which is particularly true in Chamorro culture.

Everyone discovers that life leads to and ends in death, but few Euro-Americans can complete the loop and acknowledge that death supports life here in this world. In dualistic fashion Euro-Americans expect an after-life very different from this one. In part this nondual world view explains why for ancient or pre-modern Micronesians, and especially for the ancient Chamorros, the deceased ancestors are considered to be part of the present world and members of the living community. For the ancient cultures, the spirits of the deceased do not leave this world for another world beyond or transcendent of this world. This is particularly the case for the ancient Chamorros who kept the skulls of their ancestors in their homes and made offerings to them at certain occasions. The ancient peoples of Micronesia attempted to live in harmony with and maintain a balance between the interactions of opposing forces. The opposing forces, the high/up/right/east/south/male and the low/down/left/west/north/female, interact (Alkire, 1972—note that Alkire collected the pairs of opposites, but he did not understand their nondual interaction). The male and female generative forces (Chuukese: *manaman*; Polynesian: *mana*) constitute a hylozoistic (living) world (Oliver, 1989, p. 136). These forces procreate the next generation. Likewise the cosmic male and female forces commingle and generate the sky world above and the island-sea world below. They are not two separate worlds. Like male and female, they intermingle. In pre-modern Micronesian and Chamorro religious belief, the spirits or gods are either forces of nature or apotheosized ancestors. Their spirit powers are localized with limited powers (Hezel, 1995).

The Euro-American tendency toward dualism places value in abstraction, higher order, and structured systems of belief. These beliefs have led Euro-Americans to identify with abstract belief

systems rather than localized, social interactions. The Euro-American's identity is rooted in a religious dogma, a political ideology, or a scientific methodology. The Micronesian identity is rooted in a person's lineage. It is through the ancestors that people are related to the environment. The lineage establishes people's totem relation to the fish in the ocean, the land, the creatures on the island, and even the stars in the sky. Hence family and clan relationships are so important. The world is living, and humans share kinship relations with natural objects or animals, and practices associated with totems regulate behavior (Fischer, 1957). Instead of rigid structured belief systems; the Micronesian world is based on a rigid, structured family-social system. Relationships of interdependency and exchange define who and what a person is—not a person's abstract beliefs about the world, the state, or God. The this-worldly character of the Micronesian world view is a corollary of their nondual cosmology. The sky world is a continuation of this world. There are correlations between the gods and the forces of nature. There is an exchange system between the gods or ancestor spirits and humans. In many ways the after-life is a continuation of this life.

The "this-worldly" perspective of the Chamorro people is further seen in the journal of Fray Juan Pobre de Zamora, who visited Rota in 1602. He relates an exchange between his friend, Sancho, and some Chamorro elders. Sancho asks the Chamorros who made the heavens, the earth and the ocean (Driver, p. 23). From a European perspective, Sancho is expecting them to say that God, the First Cause and Prime Mover, created the world. But the Chamorros think the questions are foolish, and they report that they make the heavens by looking at them; they make the earth by tilling the fields and the ocean by fishing and sailing on it. Sancho thinks their answers are foolish; he is expecting a causal answer. The Chamorros have a different world view. They understand that things have value and meaning when humans engage and work them. The object perceived depends on the perceiving subject to be the kind of thing it is, and the subject in turn is, at least in part, construed by standing in relationship with the object. The subject and the object are intertwined in a nondual relationship.

The concept of the "center" plays an important role in the Micronesian nondual world view. The interaction and interpenetration of the bipolar opposites are harmonized by maintaining balance at the center. Micronesian cosmology is organized around the focal point of a center. This is especially true of Micronesian navigation techniques. The navigator (*pelu*) must continually negotiate his course from the center of the star compass as his position changes (Alkire, 1972, p. 489). The ancient Chamorros thought that Guahan (Guam) was the center of the world, and Fouha rock was their *axis mundi* (Garcia, 2004, p. 173). They most likely, like most Pacific islanders and ancient peoples, viewed the world as a flat disk covered by the sky world as an upside down bowl (Goodenough, 1986). A paradise afterlife was lived either in the sky world or in an underworld. There are "currents" or passage ways that connect the underworld, this world, and the sky world.

In describing the genetic relationship between Micronesian and Southeast Asian systems of order, Alkire (1972) incorrectly describes them as "dualistic" (p. 491). I propose that if we replace the term "nondual" for his dualistic, the point of comparison becomes much sharper. As an anthropologist, Alkire's philosophical vocabulary is lacking the intricacies of metaphysical and cosmological terminology. The description of Carolinian systems of ordering presented by Alkire actually describes a nondual world view. For example Alkire (1972) states in his summary:

Second that the comparison presented of Pacific Islanders and Southeast Asians indicates a genetic relationship, since the complex of traits compared most likely could not have diffused as a whole from one area to the other. The basic principles of this cosmological order are the square, units of four, the center, and if one prefers, dualistic divisions. In the Carolinian case *twos* and *fours* and multiples thereof, are

basic to most ceremonial events and specialists' activities: twos in halving of measurements, right and left, and divination pairs; fours in navigation directions, square form of the compass, taboos, and divination; eights in specialized counting techniques of both navigation and coconut distribution; sixteen when referring to divination spirits; and twenty-eight and thirty-two as the basis of the navigator's celestial compass. In Southeast Asia dualistic oppositions are emphasized between right and left, major and minor, etc.; fours, eights, and twelves are involved in determining political divisions, ministries, sub and assistant ministers; and twenty-four, twenty-eight, or thirty-two define districts, provinces, celestial or political divisions and important spirits. In both areas the midpoint and center play major roles in conceptual order (p. 491).

Alkire's description and point of comparison would be sharper and more to the point, if he described these cosmologies or systems of ordering as nondual, rather than dualistic. He has overlooked the co-dependent, interpenetration of the opposites that characterize the nondual system of order.

In addition to the above list given by Alkire, the following is a summary of examples of nondualism in Micronesian and Chamorro thought. First, the male and female creative powers interact to generate the world or social order. Second, the totem sib relations between humans and the natural environment depict their interrelatedness. Third, there is a bipolar continuum between the sky world and this world. Fourth, there are bipolar relationships present between the compass directions—the horizon point of rising and setting stars—, and the correlative relationships between inland and ocean side orientations, and the correlations of right/left, east/west, north/south, and male/female orientations. Fifth, life, death, and the after-life interact. Sixth, systems of exchange exist between spirits and humans, and humans and spirits. Seventh, the alterations between good and bad behavior promote nondual ideas about human nature. The Chuukese two soul theory is the strongest example of this nondual approach concerning human nature (Hezel, 1995). Eight, there is an ebb and flow between good and bad luck. Ninth, the diviner's perceived ability to predict the future exhibits a nonduality of the past, the present and the future. The ancient Micronesian and Chamorro world views are different from the modern perspective, but they offer an interesting alternative way of thinking about the world and our place in it.

When the contemporary reader gains a glimpse of the nondual cosmology, she can begin to acknowledge that the use of magic in the ancient Pacific is not a misguided appeal to the fallacy of false cause that the use of magic is usually presented to be. In the nondual world view, objects and people take on extraordinary powers based on either their direct contact with certain people, places or things or their indirect correlated connection with certain people, places or things based on the nondual cosmology. In the nondual cosmology the pairs of opposites correlate with each other based on the perceived energy field generated by each thing. Day attracts evening; life attracts death. By understanding and manipulating the energy fields of things and people the ancient arts of making (magic) were constructed to assist humans in achieving specific goals, contributing to the value of their lives.

Chamorro Warfare and War Magic

The Chamorro arsenal consisted of short spears or darts, clubs, the sling and sling stones, and fire balls; spear points were often made from human tibia. When metal was introduced, they preferred the machete. They dug trenches and built wall for both offensive and defensive

maneuvers. According to Garcia (2004), when the Chamorros engaged the Spaniards and their muskets, a Chinese trader, named Choco Sangley (Freycinet, 2003, p. 25), who was blown off course when en route to Indonesia from Manila and was living among the Chamorro when San Vitores entered the Mariana islands, designed a movable shield to protect them from the musket balls. The ancient specialists, who served as medicine-man, shaman, diviner and sorcerer, were known as a *kakahna* (Polynesian, *kahuna*) or *makahna* (alternate spelling, *macana*). I prefer to use the term *kakahna* because I believe that it is etymologically older, and the term “*makahna*” refers to the art of making magic, but early on it became associated with the maker of the magic. The *kakahna* were believed to be able to control the weather, especially the rain, and bring or prevent storms, destroy the harvest or make it bountiful, and bring in or drive away the fish.

Garcia (2004, p. 226) relates how the skulls were appealed to in order to bring rain. The *kakahna* (*makahna* or *macana*) employed the skulls of deceased ancestors when enacting their spells and divination (Garcia 2004, pp.173-74). After the corpse decomposed, the Chamorros would exhume it and remove the skull. The skull was kept in a woven basket in their respective houses. Ancient Chamorro religion centered itself around ancestor veneration. Before people engaged in important activities such as planting, harvesting, travel, fishing and warfare, offerings were made to their ancestors, who were represented by the skulls, in an attempt to receive the ancestors’ permission, protection and assistance. According to the accounts of San Vitores, the ancient Chamorros believed that the ancestor’s spirit, *aniti* or *anite*, survived death (Garcia, 2004, 173-74, and 226).

The power, protection and assistance of the ancestors were sought in war. The Chamorros deployed their ancestors’ skulls when they entered battle. For example Garcia (2004, pp. 240, and 243) describes two battle scenes with deployed skulls. On the eleventh of September, 1671, Garcia relates an attack by two-thousand Chamorros against 31 Spanish soldiers, claiming that for eight days and nights the Chamorros showered them with sling stones with such force that the stones broke through the church roof.

They also dug earthworks to protect themselves from the sallies of our soldiers, who were not content to fight within their fortifications. But the barbarians, seeing that the Spaniards destroyed their work, took counsel with their *macanas* (*kakahna*) and commended their trenches to the devil in an explicit pact, placing in them the skulls of their deceased (Garcia, p. 240).

Drawing on the “living” power of the ancestor, the Chamorros were able to build confidence, and courage. The skulls not only reminded them of their ancestors, but more importantly they also reminded them of the ancestors’ courage, skill and battle techniques. The skulls were used to instill fear in the enemy by showing the enemy that every warrior on the battlefield was accompanied by his ancestor. The account given above relates that the *kakahnas* were present on the battlefield. In this sense they also served as military specialists similar to the *Itang* in Chuukese culture.

However after the Chamorros’ trenches were overrun and the skulls taken and destroyed, then they sue for peace.

Finally, on October 20 (1671), the enemy hurled himself at our enclosure. Our men made a sally with such courage that in the shortest interval they put the enemy to flight, destroyed the earthworks, cast the skulls on the ground, and trampled on them. ... That terrified them to such a degree, ... they came with great humility to beg forgiveness, peace, and mercy. (Garcia, p. 242-243)

Such was the power of the ancestors, if they allowed the warrior’s position to be overrun, the living accepted the defeat. The Chamorros were not merely surrendering to the Spanish. They were also

surrendering to their ancestors. In their nondual way of thinking, their ancestors must have deserted them such that the Spanish were able to overtake them. After San Vitores was killed or martyred, the Spanish moved the Chamorros who lived on the northern islands into camps on Guam, which initiated a war. By 1700 it is estimated that about 2000 Chamorro women and children survived. The ancient Chamorro culture and the way of the *kakahna* had come to an end.

Based on the above accounts, it is clear that the ancient Chamorros did employ war magic in their domestic battles and in waging war against the Spanish. Generally speaking in Micronesia people appealed to magic and war magic to obtain desired results. The belief in love potions persists to this day (Young, et. al, 1997, and Caughey, 1977). The island of Yap was once seen as the seat of a great kingdom ruled by magical power (Lessa, 1950). The Chuuk (Truk) specialist in combat tactics, the *Itang*, employs magical charms and potions (actual poisons) to subdue an enemy (Caughey, 1977). The medicine men and women of Pohnpei also employ magical formulae (Riesenberg, 1948). In this regard, Micronesia offers many prospects for future studies of both ancient and contemporary uses of magic.

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War Magic among the Ancient Chamorros

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