

Chamoru Philosophy: Its Past and Future

By Dr. James D. Sellmann / Univ of Guam

Editor: Rudolph Villaverde

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The wisdom of the Chamoru tradition is primarily contained within an oral tradition; because of this, I am very much indebted to the people who shared their insights with me. I should clarify at the outset that philosophy is not primarily a descriptive activity; especially moral philosophy, of which this paper is an example, is not descriptive, but rather it is prescriptive. Moral philosophy proposes prescriptions on how one ought to live; it does not describe the manner in which people actually live—description is the job of the social sciences, psychology, sociology and anthropology. Naturally, philosophy must depend on the scientific description to gather “facts” about the world and human life. It is the job of philosophy to interpret the “facts.” If, in fact, few people live according to the values expressed in this paper, then that would only make the prescriptive value of Chamoru moral philosophy all the more significant for our present and future lives.

In this paper I present a twofold argument: first, I argue that one needs to understand the past to gain insight into the present situation and the future development of a philosophical tradition, and second I argue that certain elements of ancient traditional Chamoru philosophy are influencing the course of life on Guam.

Philosophy entails a study of the methods by which a people create meaning in their lives through the pursuit of wisdom and value. Each tradition defines “wisdom and value” in its own terms. In the cultures with literary philosophical traditions one only has to read the texts to discover the respective approaches to wisdom. Generally speaking, in the monotheistic traditions, e.g. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, wisdom is pursued by the prophets who implore the people to adhere to the “will of God” and establish and maintain social justice. In the philosophical traditions of India, China and Europe, wisdom is pursued by “sages” who seek an understanding of the true nature of the self and the world. The various cultural traditions of science have developed an understanding of the nature of the world, while the literary traditions have focused on understanding the self or self realization—even where that understanding leads one to a realization of no self (anatman or wu wo) as it does in Buddhism and Taoism. In some of the village and tribal societies, wisdom is pursued by a shaman who achieves ecstasy by entering into altered states of consciousness.

Naturally, these are gross generalizations and there is quite a bit of overlap in approaches to wisdom among these diverse traditions. Despite these general categories, it is my understanding that the ancient Chamoru way is different.

Ancient Chamoru approaches to wisdom (finayi, kotdura,



tinemtom) are revealed in the material and non-material cultural forms of life (Topping, 1975). If the archeological dating, which places people on Guam at about 3500 BP, is correct, then there was about three thousand years of cultural history on Guam before contact with European culture. Because the future of a tradition is dependent on its past, one must make a study of the ancient Chamoru forms of life to better understand its present and future orientation, values, and meaning of life (Cunningham, 1992, Diaz, 1992, Fritz, 1984, Haverlandt 1970's).

Ancient society is plagued by two dominant obstacles: a hostile environment, and threats to social cohesion. Typhoons aside, the environment in the Western Pacific is relatively benign--this is true of life on a high island and not an atoll. Thus, the major obstacle to living a meaningful life for the ancient Chamoru was primarily one of maintaining social cohesion. The attainment of wisdom in such a context is less concerned with a mastery of understanding nature and directed instead toward maintaining peace and harmony within the community. If this is the case, then the highest good for the ancient Chamoru was "a life of personal peace, family tranquility and clan harmony." (The reader should keep in mind that no one person or culture is perfect, and the Chamoru are not an exception to this rule; there were and still are intense personal conflicts, family disputes, and fervent clan conflicts. The moral concern is not how we in fact live, but rather how we ought to live?) One of the Chamoru expressions which captures this concern is **inafa'maolek** ("making it good for each other", "mutual cooperation," or "interdependency"). Various forms of ancient cultural activities (e.g. warfare, debate, song and dance, religion, social order and the caste system) will be examined to explicate the traditional values. Their significance for modern life will be easy to identify. Finally, this presentation should encourage the reader to critically evaluate and discuss how the traditional values can best be used to influence our future.

A: Some History.

There are at least two good reasons to study history. First, it seems reasonable that one would want to avoid the mistakes of the past, and history should reveal those errors. Second, I argue that one cannot properly plan for the future without understanding where one is at present, and the present cannot be fully grasped until one knows something of the past. The division of history into past, present and future is done for heuristic purposes. In fact I believe one can only speak from the present, but the present is supported by its past

and is unfolding into its future.

Consider the following diagram:



We stand at the present; the past supports us, but we can only understand that past from the present; we project our present needs and desires into the past, and we draw from the past those materials we believe will fulfill our present and future interests. At the same time, here in the present, we project our future--the ideals we aspire toward, and those future expectations come back around and constitute our present. So we are never alienated from the past or the future; as fully temporal creatures the past and the future are alive in us now in the present.

Therefore, allow me to briefly outline some significant events in Chamoru history. Because the time period covers several thousand years, my comments can only be superficial.

On to the past

1993 Conference on commonwealth status, held in Washington D.C.

Chamoru Land Trust committee established.

1993 Congressional representative given voting privileges.

1990 Richardo Bordallo's suicide.

1950 The Organic Act.

1941-44 Japanese occupation.

1899-1941 & 1944-50 USA Naval administration.

1899 Treaty of Paris.

1815 Mexican Revolution ends Acapulco-Manila Galleon trade.

1700 Galleon trade; disease continues process of de-population.

1672 Father Sanvitores killed.

1670-95 Spanish reduction of and war (1672-95) against the Chamoru peoples--population nearly genocided from tens of thousands to a few thousand--by 1672, 50,000 were baptized, about 1,318 remained by 1786.

1668 Fr. Sanvitores arrives; he renames the islands Mariana.

1602 Fray Juan Pobre de Zamora on Rota for seven months.

1565 Legazpi claims the Ladrones for Spain--250+ years of galleon trade between Manila and New Spain (Mexico).

1526-65 No known record of Western contact with Guam.

1521 Magellan's unfortunate and violent "encounter" with the Chamoru.

800-1695 A.C.E. Latte culture--modifications and advances in architecture, pottery, tools and weapons--possible invasion by Pacific warrior people.

1320 B.C.E. Village near Inarajan.

1485 B.C.E. Village at Tarague beach.

1527 B.C.E. Village sight at Chalan Piao, Saipan.

2000 - 1500 B.C.E. Discovery of the Mariana islands.

2000 B.C.E. - 800 A.C.E. Pre-Latte culture.

3000-2000 B.C.E. Ancient Navigators (Nusantao--island homeland people) discover islands of the Western Pacific.

From this brief historical survey one can see that there was well over two-thousand years of ancient cultural heritage in the Mariana Islands before contact with Westerns. This shows us that there is a rich cultural tradition for the Chamoru people yet to be explained completely. It is my suspicion that many of those ancient traditional values still play a role in the modern life of the Chamoru.

Back to the future

From the brief survey of history one discovers that the discussion of Chamoru cultural values is a complex matter. On top of a two thousand year indigenous cultural base, there is a layer of over three hundred years of Spanish Catholic influence (1565-1898), and one hundred years of American and Japanese (4 years) cultural influences and various other Pacific island culture contacts which impact on the development of cultural values on Guam and throughout the Mariana islands. Planning the future for Guam, in general, and one's personal life, in particular, requires an understanding of what these various cultural values are and how they operate to construct a meaningful life. Here I want to focus on some of the traditional Chamoru values.

B: Some of the important philosophical concepts of the ancient Chamoru.

The Chamoru expression inafa'maolek ("making it good for each other," "interdependence" or "mutual cooperation") is a core value around which a constellation of other values takes shape. Inafa'maolek taken as "interdependence" shows us that the central value of the Chamoru world view was that of kinship relations--the extended family and clan. **The ancient Chamoru did not live in an isolated mechanistic world, but rather their world was a living world (hylozoistic).** The person was defined by her interrelationships with other members of the community. These relationships were not limited to one's living relatives and neighbors; **the ancestors (anti or aniti, animas or later taotaomonas) of the past were considered part of the living community (Topping, 1975), and the natural environment was also accepted as part of one's "living family" relations.** Interdependence, then, meant that one kept one's obligations to the environment, the ancestors, and one's distant and immediate relatives to maintain harmony.

A life of harmony was taken to be the highest form of human achievement. Harmony within the community, with the ancestors, and with the natural environment was understood to be the most important aspect of a meaningful adult life. **Harmony was valued more than being right or even correcting a wrong doing (Cunningham, 1992).**

Other concepts that help give shape to the constellation of ancient Chamoru cultural and philosophical values are: reciprocity, positive forms of reciprocity are chenchule' (gifts of money or food) and ayudu



(assistance or help), negative forms entail emmok (revenge). Consensus (todu manatungo'), primarily among clan leaders, naturally played an important role in the ancient decision making process. Social position, rank and senior age played an important part in maintaining social order and cooperation. Mamahlao (behaving with respect and deference) was highly prized; one of the worst things one could do was to publicly ridicule or shame another person. Thus, there had to be controls placed on the competition (champada) for rank and social status. The gupot (party, celebration or feast) played an important role in defining family and community solidarity. **Since the world itself was seen as a living world which was also full of ancestral spirits, we should expect that the ancient Chamoru believed that they were intertwined with the land and ocean; humans were another part of nature not something separate from it.** So the ancient Chamoru would be inclined not to exploit the natural environment. Their food, medicine and tools all came from nature; we can safely say that they held an advanced ecological outlook.

Other concepts highly valued were: humor, intelligence, friendly competition, physical abilities, and cleanliness. Lawrence J. Cunningham (1992, p. 96) gives the following list of key concepts which form the Chamoru value constellation--I have made some modifications:

Ancestors, age, bravery, cleanliness, friendly competition, cooperation, dexterity, extemporaneousness, friendliness, fun, harmony, hospitality, intelligence, kindness, loyalty (mamahlao), mutualism, non-confrontation, peace, rank, adaptability, banter, buffoonery, cleverness, consensus, creativity, discipline, family authority, friendship, generosity, hierarchy, improvisation, inafa'maolek (interdependence), love (sexual and unconditional), manners, nature, nurture, physical skills, reciprocal behavior (chenchule', a'ok, ika, ayudu, and emmok), respect, (anti)selfishness, social position, trading ability, security, sharing, strength, unpretentiousness.

C: Some of the cultural practices which reflect the above values.

Various forms of ancient cultural activity (e.g. navigation and agriculture, warfare, debate, song and dance, religion, social order and the caste system) will be examined to explicate the traditional values.

Navigation and agriculture:

The importance of building and navigating the ancient ocean sailing canoe (sakman) cannot be overstated (Shell, no date). The



ancient Chamoru were first and foremost ocean sailors. The inhabitation of the islands and the life of the people depended on the ocean canoes. The technology of the canoe represents the concept of interdependency; the canoe is kept in balance by the outrigger. The parts of the canoe must fit and work together. They must withstand the ocean waves, being flexible, and they must be easy to repair while out at sea. The art and science of ancient Chamoru navigation inspires me with awe, especially after having taken a night sail to Luta (Rota). We needed a compass; the ancients navigated by the stars and ocean currents, the migration of birds, cloud patterns, and a strong sense of wonder and investigation. Ancient navigation also demonstrates the importance of interdependency; people had to rely upon and work with the forces of nature. They had to have a reasonable knowledge of the ocean, and how to appropriately harmonize with it. Ancient sailing was a group activity; the sailing crew had to work together in harmony with each other, and they had to depend on the skill and knowledge of the navigator (and the ancestors) to complete a journey.

Because the Pacific islands do not contain a natural food supply, the original discoverers and early mariners had to carry the seeds, shoots and plant cuttings to grow their own food once land was found. Agriculture, especially agriculture from plant cuttings and shoots, shows a profound reliance on interdependency with nature. **The human does not dominate nature, but rather works in harmony with it. The life force is carried along and nurtured- the crops depend on humans; humans depend on the crops.**

Warfare:

Naturally, social harmony was not a constant. Just as one cannot always depend on nature, one cannot always depend on others. At times social interdependency totally breaks down--feelings are hurt, someone is shamed, and conflict arises. Warfare itself was part of the reciprocal relationship. Just as gifts require an exchange or repayment so do insults and harms. Because the individual is interrelated with the whole clan, to insult or harm one is to harm all and may require war. The ancient Chamoru wars were, as best we can gather from the few reports, rather humane in that they did not go to the extreme of annihilating the whole clan (Driver, 1989). The war usually ended after someone was wounded or a few warriors were killed. Some form of payment often tortoiseshell money, could be used to sue for peace (Cunningham,1992, Haverlandt, 1970's).

Debate:

Because the ancient Chamoru had an oral tradition, we do not



this shows us that the ancient Chamoru world view accepted an interdependency in life and between life and death, between the past (generations) and the future. **The myths and legends also express the importance of human interrelatedness with and the need to have respect for nature and the ancestors, and they also show the influence from outside sources and the Chamoru adaptability to such influences.** [A note on terminology: such terms as shaman, animism, and ancestor worship are currently out of date or do not properly apply to the ancient Chamoru religion.]

Social Order and the Caste System:

The first Westerners to write about the Chamoru, e. g. Pigafetta, and Garcia, claim that the Chamoru had no law and social order. Nothing could be further from the truth. That kind of thinking would be used to justify imperialism and colonialism. Although there is a good deal of controversy about the specifics of the ancient social order and caste system, nevertheless it is clear that there was a form of matrilineal social organization and a system of reward and punishment. The depth of ancient and modern Chamoru wisdom is revealed in the significance given to women in the social order. A good deal of social and political power was and is rightly in the hands of the women and the mother's lineage. A truly wise people find a balance of powers among the sexes. The Chamoru attempt to maintain such a balance.

Traditional Medicine:

It is more than interesting to note that one of the strongest remnants of ancient traditional culture has been preserved in the traditional healing arts (McMakin, 1978). Although the spiritual practices of the makahna were for the most part expunged by Catholicism, the tradition of herbal medicines has persisted to this day. When Europe was practicing the totally foolish and ineffective procedure of "bleeding," the Chamoru were using a more sensible approach of herbal remedies. Possibly the Spanish were less inclined to prohibit herbal medicines because of their contact with the Arabs and their approach to medicine, and even more important was the fact that the herbal remedies obtained results. The art and science of healing and medicine gives us another example of the profound depth of Chamoru wisdom. It reveals the strong ties between people and their environment. The idea that plants have healing powers within them and that the medicine person can unlock those secrets is evidence of a



profound scientific perspective. There are also philosophical moral implications underlying healing practices which again relate the close ties of interdependency among people and their caring and concern for each other.

Conclusions:

Limitations of time and space do not permit me to discuss in great detail all of the aspects of traditional Chamoru culture and philosophy. I have only been able to scratch the surface, and yet hopefully, it is clear that there is a profound depth and richness of Chamoru philosophy which deserves our respect. More importantly, it should be acknowledged that there are a number of important values in traditional Chamoru culture which lend meaning and significance to modern life. Precisely how these values will effect the heritages of the Twenty-first century depends on our present ideals, expectations and the manner in which we raise and educate the youth. The spirit of the culture and the spirit of the ancestors speak to us now, and it will be there to speak in the future. The question now is: "Are we listening to that spirit?"

After-words

At the College of Arts and Sciences conference, a panel of distinguished people responded to the above paper: Dr. Marilyn Salas, Dr. Bernadita Camacho-Dungca, Mr. Frank Rabon, and Mr. Ed Mendiola. They all criticized the paper for only scratching the surface, and I fully agree. This paper is the first introduction of the topic and the space allotted does not permit for a fuller, more detailed presentation at this time. Dr. Salas and Dungca, and Mr. Mendiola criticized my inability to speak Chamoru. Especially Dr. Dungca, who is a linguist, criticized the value of a study written by a non-Chamoru and non-native speaker of the language. I believe that these are partly valid criticisms. I have been studying Chamoru language, and my paper does reflect sensitivity to the language, at least on a conceptual level. I did make use of Dr. Dungca's, co-authored, Chamorro-English Dictionary (Topping 1975); I also compensated for my lack of personal knowledge by talking to professionals at the University of Guam, and by interviewing people in the community and especially traditional healers. Although further language study is a basic requirement for becoming an "expert" in the field, nevertheless I am not trying to be "the expert." I am trying to present some of my research findings and open them up to discussion. Moreover, many scholars make remarks about other cultures without knowing the language. For example, I teach Greek philosophy but do not read Greek, and the average Roman Catholic understands something about that religion without having to read Greek and Latin. During the open discussion, some Chamoru admitted



that they did not speak the language or had to learn it as adults, and I would add that they do have some idea of what it means to be Chamoru. There was some criticism that my paper was too idealistic and did not reflect the reality of Chamoru life. This also is true, but it was not my intention to do descriptive sociology or anthropology. It was my intention to explicate the ideal moral values and wisdom of Chamoru philosophy. It is not at all clear how past and present conflicts reflect that wisdom—although I did discuss how traditional warfare practices, reveal some of the ancient humanness of the Chamoru. Dr. Dungca also raised a serious hermeneutic question: "Is it really possible for a foreigner, with an outsider's optic perspective, to fully grasp the inner life of my Chamoru culture?" I fully agree that there are unique differences which set us apart individually and culturally; however, at the same time there must be enough similarities among us to allow for interpersonal communication and translation of language and culture. During the discussion the distinction was made between "silent insiders" and "vocal outsiders," a number of Chamoru stood up and expressed their thoughts on what it meant for them to be Chamoru. The ultimate and explicit agenda (see the end of the introduction above) underlying this paper was to stimulate people, Chamoru and non-Chamoru, to think critically about the values which make their lives meaningful now, and how those values will influence and have significance for the future. Therefore, even if the ideas expressed in my paper are entirely wrong, still the paper provides a text and a context for the individual to think critically and express her or his own values, and this was done during and after the conference session and that was all I intend the paper to do.

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In 1994 the Chamoru Language commission of Guam changed the spelling of Chamorro to Chamoru; note that the "ch" is pronounced like a "ts."



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