What Do College Students Know About Their Cultural Heritage In Relation to Traditional Necklaces?

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Author’s Note:

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*Abstract*

Culture in the CNMI plays a big role for its inhabitants, but lately it seems that it may possibly be dying off. This research project describes how much people who live on the island know about their culture. Surveys and questionnaires based on traditional necklaces were distributed through ought the Northern Marianas College to different ethnic groups of different ages. Online surveys and one on one interviews with traditional Chamorro necklace carvers were also used in collecting information. The initial data collected in the first few days showed that about three of the 25 participants, including the locals (Chamorro’s and Carolinians) don’t know much about their culture relating to the traditional jewelry.

*Statement of the problem*

The Ancient Chamorro culture has been around for well over a thousand years, having encountered many obstacles in its way. Some of which were so dramatic that caused the Chamorro culture to change its ways and view things from a different perspective. These were mostly the result of Spanish and Japanese colonization and influences during World War 2. However as years passed, many people have claimed that the Chamorro culture in this modern day and era is slowly dying out with the elders. “OVER the past 30 years, the number of Chamorro speakers on Guam has declined steadily – from 35,000 in 1990 to 25,000 as of the last census in 2010” (White J.). It seems that some of the young Chamorro people are losing touch of their ancestral roots. These sentiments prompted the student researcher to conduct a miniature research experiment to find out if such claims have any truth behind them.

Instead of testing participant’s knowledge of language, the student researcher will doing it on three Traditional Chamorro Necklaces. Body ornamentation was chosen as it has been in the culture since the beginning of time. Body ornamentation can be clothing, make up, hair accessories or even necklaces. Necklaces for example, can be seen as a status symbols, gender indicators, festive wear, war appearance, and also used just to enhance beauty (Flores). For this particular research I will look at the necklaces: Sinahi, Spondylus and the Guinahan Fama’guon.

*Purpose of the study*

As a native Chamorro islander who was born and raised here on the Island of Saipan, I find culture to be very important for ones self. The issue of cultural loss today really concerns the researcher, as it may be it applied to everyone because it plays an important role in showing people who they are and where they come from. It is like an identification card. Without it, people wont know who you are. In a Marianas Variety article written by Noel Quitugua, he states, “CHAMORROS are not only a minority in their own commonwealth, but their culture is slowly disappearing due to the “limited focus” … “The Chamorro culture is slowly disappearing. We’re losing our culture faster than we can save it,” Quitugua said ... “We’ve already lost so many things in our culture. The children are the future of our generation ... “ (Casas 2002). With this study, I look to find out myself if the culture really is dying out or not.

*Background information*

The Ancient Chamorro’s were crafting people who made necklaces that remain difficult to make today with modern tools. It makes you wonder how they carved with little to no tools available. The Sinahi, which was made out of giant clamshell, translates into “Quarter Moon” in English (Whitman 2010). This necklace was special because the Chief of the village only wore it. Spondylus is a reddish orange necklace that was made out of oyster. It was mainly worn by women and children of the village and was sometimes used as currency. Guinahan Fama’guon translates into “Children’s Wealth” (Flores) and was made out of turtle shell. The value of the necklace was based on how the turtle was caught and at times deemed priceless (Cunningham p 79).

*Literature review on my topic*

Chamorro people have inhabited the Island of Saipan since the 1500’s and maybe even earlier. Within this time frame many major events has occurred that may have caused deterioration of the local culture. With the eagerness to find out whether the Chamorro culture is dying or not, the student researcher began his research on March 10th, 2015 with an online web search on Google scholar with key words “Ancient Chamorro culture” and, “Traditions” which came up with 2380 results. Most of the articles results described how the Chamorro’s came to the Northern Marianas Islands, and their way of life in the past. None of the articles under the Google scholar search proved useful in answering my question. Culture preservation is a really important issue that has to be brought up amongst the local people. This short essay presents a brief review of literature on the preservation of the Chamorro culture and traditions.

Advancing in the research, the student turned to a database called EBSCO. Searching key words such as “Chamorro” and “Culture”, just 14 results were displayed, and only 4-5 of the articles actually dealt with Chamorro culture. The majority of articles reported studies about Japans influence on the Native Islanders, and US military build up. All of which rendered valueless towards my research. One article titled “The Languages of Three Generations of Chamorro Women” was a study done to see the differences in language and tradition between 3 women from different generations (Santos-Bamba 2013 p92). The study showed that the language strength and comfort in these women all differed depending on which generation they are from. For example: The woman in Generation 1 was more confident in her Chamorro language skills contrary to the woman from generation 3 who was actually not comfortable enough to speak her own language. The woman in generation 3 said “While their

Understanding of Chamorro is satisfactory, they are not confident in their ability to converse in the language” (Santos-Bamba 2013 p92). This shows that the culture while not completely proven, seems to be dying off at a steady rate.

After looking at several peer reviewed and academic articles with almost no information that could be used, the student researcher moved on to secondary sources. The researcher began with the local newspapers. Over 100 pages of local news relating to the Chamorro Culture shows up. One article titled “Is the Chamorro language dead?” caught my attention. The title itself clearly shows that people are beginning to see that the Chamorro culture is slipping through our hands and we are not even aware of it. In a quote by John DelRosario Jr., he states “Up ahead, our children would see the loss of something intrinsically valuable as it recedes with the tide of neglect, so mutilated by the demands of modernity” (DelRosario Jr. 2012 Para1).

*Research questions*

As the Student Researcher begins this project, he begins by asking:

1. Primary Research question: What do local students at NMC know about their cultural background dealing with traditional Chamorro necklaces?
2. Secondary Research Question: How much do they know? Where did they learn it?

3. Is the Chamorro Culture really being forgotten?

All these questions are important in finding out whether or not the culture is dying. Although the researcher has yet to collect any data from fieldwork, literature suggests that there is a possible decline of knowledge in the Chamorro Culture. It seems that there has been a decrease in the numbers of Chamorros’ that actually speak their native language. If this is true, then the probability of the local islanders having knowledge in the traditional necklaces are really low.

*Research design/Methodology*

A survey of 10 questions was developed that deals strictly with the Ancient Chamorro Necklaces. The Student Researcher designed it specifically to gather as much information as possible from volunteer participants. The survey was distributed electronically through email. In the event that is unsuccessful the Student Researcher made a back up plan. He went around campus to disperse as much surveys by hand as possible (See Appendix A). If the participant had time to spare, a separate sheet with pictures of the traditional necklaces was shown and the participant was asked to match it with the correct terms. This contained only the three main types of necklaces; Sinahi, Spondylus and Guinahan Fama’guon. Aside from that, the Student Researcher also conducted an interview with Chamorro Historian Noel B. Quitugua, (See Appendix B) who is currently located in Lynwood, Washington. Because of the distance, the interview was done through Email. Traditional Carvers on island were also on the agenda for interviews (See Appendix C). The Student Researcher was able to interview carver Steven Van Winkle to find what perspective he has on the different types of necklaces. After all has been done, the data and responses were collected and analyzed.

*Data analysis*

Unfortunately only 8 responses were collected on the online survey (See Appendix D). The participants composed of six Chamorros, a Filipina and an a US/Australian descent. Five were male ages 18-23 and the rest were female and ages were 20, 18 and 40+. From their responses to the survey, it showed that they actually knew what they were talking about on most of the questions. Five out the eight participants answered correctly on average. Although this does not prove that the Chamorro Culture is dying, it gives me an idea of what people know about the culture. However, the Student Researchers contingency plan of walking around campus to distribute surveys to random people proved to be the more successful one. I passed out a total of 35 surveys and received 22 back. 16 of which were Islanders, 4 were Filipinos, and 2 were Korean. Ages ranged from 18-28. 17 of the participants were male and the rest were females. After receiving back the surveys, I collected all responses and analyzed the results. The data showed that most of the Local people knew what the necklace Spondylus was, but not Sinahi and Guinahan Fama’guon. The Filipino and Korean participants seemed to have guessed their answers, as there was no correlation in right or wrong responses. So from a total of 29 participants that responded to the survey, just 3 answered all questions correctly. This were not good results considering that 16 out of the 30 were local Chamorro’s. On a small scale like this, the Student Researcher can determine that the knowledge in Chamorro Culture is steadily declining.

On a separate matter. The interview with Noel Quitugua was done through Skype on February 27, 2015. Mr. Quitugua is a Chamorro Historian who used to work at the Historic Preservation Office while he was staying in Saipan. He is now residing in Lynwood, Washington. This was a short 5-minute interview that discussed the importance of preserving the Chamorro culture. When asked what he thinks of the current Chamorro Culture situation and if he thought it is really dying. He states, “Yes, it is dying, ever since I was still living there I can see it all around the island. Less and less kids were speaking their native tongue. Most don’t even know what Chamorro jewelry and artifacts are and what they look like. It is really a sad thing, I encourage everyone to learn their language and learn their roots. It’s very important to know these things and eventually teach it to their future children. If the culture dies out one day I wont know what to do! I might lose my mind”. He is also a renowned local artist who has been replicating Chamorro jewelry, tools and accessories for years now. “Carving and learning what tools the Ancient Chamorro’s used is a good way to embrace the Culture and traditions”. Before the interview ended Mr. Quitugua emphasized on a few words. These words were “Hasso Yu’, Fa’na°gue Yu’, Na’I’yu ni’ Yoku”. In English this means, “Remember me, Teach of me, and give them what’s is theirs”. This is speaking in behalf of the Chamorro ancestors telling the modern day Chamorro parents to teach their young about the past because it’s their right to know who they are. Although he is a long way from home, Mr. Quitugua is a strong Chamorro advocate that urges young people to learn and teach their cultural heritage.

*Conclusion*

Culture is a very controversial topic. Some think it is important for everyone and there are those who think less of it. Take for example, parents don’t take the time to teach and enrich their children’s life with their native culture and traditions. Those are the types of behavior that fuels the fire to forget the culture. To the Chamorro People it seems to be a bit more the latter, resulting in a decrease of Chamorro Culture knowledge in it’s own people. The research done on what college students know about their cultural heritage in relation to traditional necklaces proved to be a tough one. With just twenty-five participants on the survey, it was not quite enough to develop a full conclusion on whether or not the culture is dying. It however, is enough to suggest what the results of a big scale survey might be in the future. If the answers remained consistent for every 25 participants for the next 100 or so people, the data would prove that the knowledge in the Chamorro Cultural Heritage is greatly decreasing amongst us. The interview with Chamorro Historian Noel Quitugua also emphasized how important it is to keep the culture well and alive for today and tomorrows future generations. If there is one thing a person might consider to their child, I hope it is their culture. They will thank you later in the future when they realize how important it is.

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Appendices

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This paper was prepared for EN-202, taught by Doctor Kimberly Bunts- Anderson

Appendix A: Blank Survey

**1. Information**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Information  Age |  |
| Nationality |  |
| Sex |  |
| Current Residence |  |
| Where were you born? |  |
| Have you ever bought any kind of Chamorro necklace. If so, what kind? |  |
| Have you ever collected any shells along the beach for beads or pendants? If yes, what beach? Name a few of the shells collected. |  |

**2. How much do you know about these ancient Chamorro Necklaces?**

|  | Really knowledgeable | Somewhat knowledgeable | Little to no knowledge | Never heard of it |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Sinahi | https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gif | https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gif | https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gif | https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gif |
| Spondylus | https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gif | https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gif | https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gif | https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gif |
| Guinahan Famagu'on | https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gif | https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gif | https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gif | https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gif |

**3. From your knowledge, what do you think is the meaning of the word 'Sinahi'?**

|  |
| --- |
| https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gifFrom your knowledge, what do you think is the meaning of the word 'Sinahi'?  Quarter Moon  https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gifTo Sail the ocean  https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gifThe Sun |

**4. Spondylus is an oyster shell necklace of what color?**

|  |
| --- |
| https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gifSpondylus is an oyster shell necklace of what color?  White  https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gifOrange  https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gifGrey |

**5. The necklace Guinahan Famagu'on (Children's Wealth) is made out of what?**

|  |
| --- |
| https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gifThe necklace Guinahan Famagu'on (Children's Wealth) is made out of what?  Clam Shell  https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gifBone  https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gifTurtle Shell |

**6. In ancient times, who is allowed to wear the Sinahi?**

|  |
| --- |
| https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gifIn ancient times, who is allowed to wear the Sinahi?  Only the Chief of the village.  https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gifWomen and Children  https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gifAnyone |

**7. The Spondylus Shell necklace was not only worn as Jewelry but also used as what?**

|  |
| --- |
| https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gifThe Spondylus Shell necklace was not only worn as Jewelry but also used as what?  Currency  https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gifWeapon  https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gifBait |

**8. The Sinahi, a Traditional Chamorro Necklace, was made out of what material?**

|  |
| --- |
| https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gifThe Sinahi, a Traditional Chamorro Necklace, was made out of what material?  Whale tooth  https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gifGiant Clam  https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gifCoral |
| **9. Do you think the necklaces Sinahi, Spodylus and Guinahan Famagu'on (Children's Wealth) can be found anywhere else in the world besides the CNMI and Guam?**   |  | | --- | | https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gifDo you think the necklaces Sinahi, Spodylus and Guinahan Famagu'on (Children's Wealth) can be found anywhere else in the world besides the CNMI and Guam?  No, because only the Chamorro's made these necklaces and no one else.  https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gifYes, because all islanders know how to carve this necklaces.  https://www.surveymonkey.com/i/t.gifI'm not so sure. | | **10. In your opinion, what ways can the Chamorro Culture be kept alive?**    In your opinion, what ways can the Chamorro Culture be kept alive? |



Appendix B: Interview Questions (Noel Quitugua)

1. Can you tell me about yourself and profession?
2. What do you think about the current knowledge in culture today on Saipan?
3. How do you feel when you see Chamorro adults that don’t speak their native tongue?
4. What can we do to preserve the Chamorro Culture?
5. What is the significance of the necklaces Sinahi, Spondylus and Guinahan Fama’guon?
6. In your opinion, do you think the Chamorro Culture is dying?

Appendix C: Interview Question (Steven Van Winkle)

1. How long have you been a traditional Chamorro carver?
2. What inspired you to become a carver?
3. In your opinion, what does the necklaces Sinahi, Spondylus and Guinahan Fama’guon mean to you?
4. Do you only concentrate on Chamorro necklaces?
5. What medium do you use to carve such necklaces?
6. Do you think a lot of today’s youth know much about this necklaces?

Appendix D: Number of responses to online survey

