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# Setting the Table: An Exploration of Chamoru Fiestas as a Site of Indigenous Survivance in the Wake of White Settler Colonialism

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## ABSTRACT

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Within the multi-tones of blue that dress the waters of the Pacific Ocean lies Guåhan, the southernmost and largest island in the Mariånas archipelago. Guåhan and the other fourteen islands that make up this crescent chain are the collective ancestral homelands of the Indigenous Chamorus. Within Western hegemony, stories about Guåhan and Chamorus are inextricably rooted in a deeply colonial past and present. What began as Spanish “discovery” in 1521 turned into three-hundred years of theft of native land and livelihood. What began as Japanese “occupation” in 1941 turned into three years of unjustified violence and death of thousands of Chamorus. What began (and remains) as the facade of American “liberation” during World War II resulted in the division of the Mariåna Islands into the territorial and commonwealth statuses of Guåhan and the Northern Mariåna Islands, respectively—euphemisms for what can be concisely defined as white settler

colonialism of Indigenous lands. These colonial histories remain reminiscent in the daily lived experiences of Chamorus, which is most evident when looking at American militarization of Guåhan. For instance, the United States military possesses nearly a third of the island, which includes natural resources and ancestral villages that are inaccessible to the Indigenous community. Chamorus, per capita, are the largest group of recruits enlisted into the American military, but as residents of an overseas colony, they are unable to vote in the presidential election for their commander-in-chief. This is just to name a few, but these facts alone paint a picture of how the status quo of white settler colonialism has been especially understood as a strictly militaristic event. My research does not seek to condemn or disregard this understanding; rather, it works to create a more holistic image of white settler colonialism within the context of Chamoru culture in Guåhan outside the hypervisibility of militarism, which I analyze at the site of the fiesta. By using the fiesta, a revered celebration in Chamoru culture, as the

optic, I explore how its constituent parts partake in the ongoing vanishment of Chamoru indigeneity and perpetuates white settler colonial remnants. Most importantly, I look at how contemporary Chamorus have reclaimed the fiesta as a space of survivance.

Keywords: Chamoru, Guåhan, Chamoru studies, Pasifika, survivance, resurgence, fiestas, indigeneity

## Introduction

I want to begin by acknowledging that this research was conducted through the University of California, San Diego, an academic institution that operates on the ancestral lands of the Kumeyaay people. I pay homage and respect to the ancestors and living descendants of the Kumeyaay along with their future generations to come.

My positionality is deeply rooted in my Pacific Islander heritage, specifically in being a woman scholar of Chamoru and Samoan descent. I was born and raised in Guåhan, the largest of the Måriana Islands where the Indigenous Chamorus claim ancestry. Like the currents and tides, Chamorus historically carried their stories across land and sea through oral tradition, which is the manner I wish to enter my project upon.

As a child, my brother and I shared a small bedroom. One evening, my dad creaked open the door and found us both fast asleep. Seeing my brother nestled comfortably in his bed, my dad broke into tears and was brought to a vivid memory of a young boy being violently forced out of his home by Japanese soldiers. He was instructed to hike from his home village of Barrigada to Manenggon, an area of Guåhan that was turned into a concentration camp during World War II.

This estimated ten-mile march held tears, pain, and deaths of innocent children and adults. Although American forces would

eventually return to “liberate” the island, the story of this child would remain and travel into the mind of my dad that night. My dad would not share this story with me until I was twenty-one, revealing that the boy in his memory was my Grandpa. Looking at my brother, so young and helpless, my dad said that he could not imagine why this would ever happen to a child, let alone his father.

These are the tales that I grew up on Guåhan hearing—ones of sadness and despair from war. I would take field trips to parks that commemorated the war, which were decorated with destroyed tanks and other military ordinances. I would play in my grandparent’s backyard and hear my grandpa singing, “Dear Uncle Sam, thanks for coming back to Guam,” a popular jingle among the manåmko’ (elders). At my Grandpa’s funeral four years ago, guardsmen handed my father a folded American flag to honor my grandfather’s service in the United States Army.

Since these stories were set in the past, I believed that my life was cleansed of colonialism. Chamorus were colonized by Spain. Chamorus were imprisoned by Japan. Chamorus were liberated by the United States. Yet every time I heard them, I was overwhelmed with a deep sense of guilt and pain.

It was not until I began taking ethnic studies courses that I finally put a face to the name. I learned that this unjustified pain that I felt throughout my life was intergenerational trauma, and although the war had ended, I began to understand that colonialism, particularly white settler colonialism<sup>1</sup>, continues to dispossess Chamorus today. Moreover, it was the understanding of colonialism as strictly militaristic that made

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<sup>1</sup> Within the context of Guåhan, white settler colonialism refers to an ongoing project of elimination where white settlers, particularly from the previous Spanish and current American colonial periods and occupations, inhabit the island and create a society and social order that displace Chamorus.

me unable to inauthentically address how it moves in my life and through my community.<sup>2</sup>

The heart of my research is to correct this misunderstanding of colonialism as something in the past or distinctly militaristic to what I argue is the malleability and transcendence of white settler colonialism. In order to make this argument tangible, my project centralizes fiestas, a gathering of family and friends for the purpose of celebration that is centered around the sharing of food, as a symbolic point of contention in perpetuating white settler colonialism. This research looks at how this same fiesta, stained by white settler colonialism, has been reclaimed by Chamorus and further signifies Indigenous survivance in the wake of continued coloniality. To articulate these points, my theoretical framework incorporates the following ideologies: white settler colonialism, vanishment, and survivance.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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The premise of my research is to look at how fiestas reveal white settler colonialism in contemporary Chamoru culture in the context of Guåhan. The literature that I will be reviewing situates recurring themes of food and militarism within the Chamoru fiesta. My intervention, however, is to address the gap between these themes by analyzing the fiesta in relation to the ideologies of white settler colonialism, vanishment, and survivance. Performing this analysis alongside the first two ideas will provide just how harmful and pervasive white settler colonialism is in

vanishing Chamoru bodies and culture while theorizing the latter will demonstrate the powerful ways Chamorus contest colonization through their survivance.

The themes outlined in the literature review are connected to a singular ideology, white settler colonialism. This is distinct from the ideas of colonialism or settler colonialism in that it directly pinpoints and shifts the accountability of coloniality to the “multiple erasures that together constitute whiteness—as both a phenotype and an ideological tool of oppression” (Mikdash, 2013). Labeling is political. Therefore, it is important to call this phenomenon by name and definitively cite it as white settler colonialism. Synonymizing this ideology with colonialism erases histories of violence and fails to recognize that white settlers are responsible for Indigenous violence and trauma.

Positioning this research in relation to white settler colonialism theorizes:

*A white settler society is one established by Europeans on non-European soil. Its origins lie in the dispossession and near extermination of Indigenous populations by the conquering Europeans... that European conquest and colonization are often denied, largely through the fantasy that [Indigenous land] was peacefully settled and not colonized (Razack, 2002).*

White settler colonialism is more comprehensively analytical of the white settler relationship to Chamorus, which is critical for further exploration of how it operates today.

My research is immensely inspired by Lila Sharif, particularly her conceptualization of the olive as a site of “vanishment” in addressing the complexities of settler colonialism in Palestine (Sharif, 2016). Vanishment is “a way to describe the processes of transforming, disappearing, replacing, and depoliticizing native subjectivities and claims to land” (Sharif, 2014). By utilizing the olive as the optic, Sharif (2014) is able to connect both the material and

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<sup>2</sup> Briefly touched upon in the abstract, militarization in this paper pertains to the numerous ways in which the United States, as a colonial empire, uses Chamoru people and lands to enact violence to solidify power.

cultural manifestations of settler colonialism to the disappearance of Indigenous people and cultures. The various ways in which the olive makes itself known, whether it be the tree, an oil, or a seed, can be recognized “as a site of knowledge and struggle” (Sharif, 2014). My work builds upon Sharif’s theorizing of vanishment within Chamoru culture by piecing together how the fiesta serves as a site of knowledge and struggle in recognizing white settler colonialism.

It is of great importance that my research recognizes that Chamorus have reclaimed the fiesta as a site of Indigenous survivance. Gerald Vizenor (2018) describes survivance as the “action, condition, quality, and sentiments of the verb survive, ‘to remain alive or in existence.’” Craig Santos Perez says survivance “reaches for a Chamorro present and future that is enmeshed in its history of colonization yet open to the independence and sovereignty of the Chamorro people” (Lai, 2011). The fiesta is entangled with white settler colonial remnants that have contributed to the vanishment of Indigeneity. Regardless, Chamorus have transformed it into a space of hospitality, community, and love, which are all values embodied within Chamoru culture. As Sharif (2016) writes, “[New] sites of knowledge necessarily emerge from the realms of culture and imagination where disappearances haunt through the most seemingly benign sites.” I conclude with this idea of survivance because the modern fiesta is the heart and soul of our people—the essence of what it means to be Chamoru.

## METHODOLOGY

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It is critical to address that Indigenous communities have struggled with legitimizing their presence within Western Academia as authors of knowledge rather than damage-based subjects, an idea theorized by Eve Tuck (2009). As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) writes, “The word itself, ‘research,’ is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world’s vocabulary,” which is a phrase that continues to define the ongoing conflict between Western scholarship and Indigenous forms of knowing the world. I utilize Smith’s *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* as the foundation of my research, as I found it extremely difficult to locate literature that discusses both the fiesta event and Chamoru culture outside of a colonial narrative. Therefore, my methodologies rely on autoethnography, which as Smith (1999) states does not conform to the traditional hegemonic convention of objectivity.

Autoethnography is a way of formulating knowledge, which is done through the first-person point of view and utilizes the individual’s experience (Pink, 2009). The use of autoethnography validates my personal experiences, and my existence as an Indigenous woman, as a rightful form of scholarship. The intellect of Indigenous people expands beyond the Western delineation of what academics should be because “our survival as peoples has come from our knowledge of our contexts, our environment... We had to know to survive” (Smith, 1999). The fact that I am presenting research through my worldview within Academia, an institution notorious for discrediting Indigenous agency, undeniably proves that resilience necessitates knowing—that my survivance is pure knowledge.

I supplement this ethnographic approach with the semiological method of cultural analysis, particularly in locating signs and analyzing how it develops a larger cultural representation. I look at the components of the fiesta to see what is consistent throughout these celebrations and analyze how these signs are used to create meanings regarding white settler colonialism.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

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Reviewing the literature, I acknowledge that there is limited scholarship detailing the Chamoru fiesta. Yet, I highlight that the available work mainly positions the fiesta in two distinct frames, food and militarism, where the former looks at the components of the table and the latter is analyzed through the occasion of Liberation Day. I address these themes in particular because though they are discussed in relation to fiestas, they do not articulate the evasive and often hidden ways that white settler colonialism makes itself known.

### Food

The fiesta is held for both celebratory and everyday occasions, but the food is one of the main reasons that this event is so beloved. VisitTheUSA.com, the “official travel site of the USA,” writes that the blend of “Chamoru heritage, years of Spanish colonialism, a brief Japanese World War II occupation and more than a century of American influence” converge to form what is the current Chamoru cuisine (2019). The website describes such setting:

*A typical fiesta table might consist of red rice, coloured with achote seed; fina'denne, a soy sauce-based condiment with vinegar and onions; titiyas, a tortilla-type flatbread made from corn or flour; kelaguen, a ceviche-like meat or seafood dish seasoned with lemon and peppers; and barbecue... You'll also find imports like Filipino lumpia, Japanese sashimi, Spanish suckling pig and even buckets of American Kentucky Fried Chicken. (VisitTheUSA.com, 2019).*

This excerpt points to the variety of cultural influences in Guåhan, yet the description of this diversity fails to acknowledge the histories that have brought these cultures together. Moreover, it does not explain the white settler colonial injustices that have produced this seemingly benevolent, multicultural representation. By unpacking the influences behind the smallest components of the feast, like the ingredients, to the largest and most explicit pieces, I aim to derive the colonial histories in order to understand how white settler colonialism exists today.

Where the contemporary flavor profile of Chamoru cuisine reigns supreme, the nutritional value does not. The narrative of the fiesta diet in scientific or epidemiological literature is that the modern “food landscape promotes a standard ‘Western’ diet: one that is high in trans and saturated fats, refined sugar, and salt, and low in macronutrients,” which has led to an increase in health disparities such as obesity and non-communicable diseases (Hammond & Perez, 2018). Perez (2013) defines food colonialism as a way in which foreign foods invaded the diets of native communities, which “[involves] taking native lands for military bases, plantations, or hotels, controlling native fisheries, establishing capitalist wage economies, growing monocrops for export, and force-feeding natives unhealthy, albeit convenient, imported foodstuffs.”

Perez importantly points to how white settler colonialism is not restricted to just militarism, but how it can move in disguised ways to negatively affect Chamorus in multi-faceted ways. Although analysis of food shows a deeply colonial past, the consequences do not end there. These foods have become staples within Chamoru culture, which hints to the continuity of white settler colonialism across time and space. The topic of food colonialism in Guåhan as Perez details is not actively

situated within fiestas, which is what I plan to do in my analyses.

## Militarism

The hegemonic narratives surrounding Guåhan are often centered around its military as a strategic vantage point. Michael Bevacqua (2012) discusses the hypervisibility of militarism in Chamoru culture as World War II is the most studied and discussed event in the history of Guåhan, which also makes it the most traumatic and relived moment. In this regard, “World War II thus becomes ‘the war’ and can be invoked as a single word reply to answering any number of Guam history questions related to...Chamorro identity and the identity of Guam itself” (Bevacqua, 2012). Bevacqua (2012) phrases hypervisibility as “how the representation of something can secure and obvious, and that it feels as if interpreting it in an alternative way is surely impossible,” this same understanding can be connected to militarism in relation to white settler colonialism.

The fiesta maintains this hypervisibility in events that memorialize the war, specifically in the Liberation Day festivities in Guåhan. The events surrounding Liberation Day commemorate the day that American troops “liberated” Guåhan from Japanese occupation, which is the setting behind the anecdote of my Grandpa provided at the beginning of this paper. Liberation Day is designated as a government holiday and celebrated with a parade held on the entire stretch of Marine Corps Drive, one of the island’s main roads (Diaz, 2001).

The Liberation Day fiesta has become a principal element of Chamoru culture, which subliminally cements a permanent association of white settler colonialism to militarism. This association is not solidified just on the holiday itself, but it is also ingrained in Guåhan daily life (e.g. main roads with names like Marine

Corps Drive and Purple Heart Highway). I acknowledge that Guåhan’s history is indivisible from militarism, as evidenced by the importance of Liberation Day festivities. However, my research uses fiestas to explain how white settler colonialism is a more encompassing structure beyond just the hypervisibility of militarization. White settler colonialism limits the perpetuation of the Chamoru language, dispossesses Indigenous peoples from their family land, destroys our ancestral burial grounds in the name of capital progress, and more. White settler colonialism is extremely pervasive and includes but is not limited to issues of militarization.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSES

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The literature discusses food and militarism as part of the fiesta but does not address a more nuanced complexity of white settler colonialism in relation to Chamoru culture. Looking instead at these themes through a theorization of white settler colonialism and vanishment shows how the fiesta is evidence that colonialism exists beyond a strict understanding of militarism, which is demonstrated through a discussion of food colonialism and Indigenous displacement. More significantly, engaging in the ideology of survivance provides how the fiesta is a place of Chamoru indigeneity in the midst of white settler colonialism.

## Food Colonialism

The gathering of Chamoru, Filipino, and American dishes on a fiesta table appears to be nothing but a mere celebration of Guåhan’s cultural diversity. However, the plating of food becomes political, as it symbolizes the erasure of colonial violence that brought these cultures together in the first place. For instance, the Jesuit missions that were established on Guåhan were simultaneously

evangelizing the native Filipino people (Crumrine, 1982). The fiesta arrangement is more than a multicultural mosaic of the island's people, but it points to settler colonial violence against Chamorus and Indigenous people of other nations. Since the island is in a location that makes it prone to tropical storms, non-perishable items like SPAM and corned beef are heavily present in local kitchens. Even in times free of storms, SPAM continues to dominate the diet of island residents. Perez (2013) describes the United States military as an "invasive species" to Guåhan, and by extension, SPAM as a "species of invasive foods." When the American government was taking Chamoru lands from Chamoru hands after World War II, the Hormel company was shipping out thousands of SPAM cans to troops at the warfront. The United States then issued these same cans to Chamorus and the rest is history.

It is critical to analyze the ingredients atop the fiesta table in relation to white settler colonialism. The reputation of Chamoru cuisine is epitomized by the fiesta, but it also hints to the vanishment of Indigenous bodies. What has become popularly associated with the Chamoru taste palate, such as high salt and fat content, are all things that have been introduced as a result of white settler colonialism. These foods have ultimately led to high health disparities among Chamorus and consequently result in illness and even death (Paulino et al., 2008). La Paperson (2017) writes about theft of Indigenous land correlating to Michel Foucault's idea of biopolitics, which he explains as, "The exercises of supremacist sovereign power over life and death [that] are most chillingly undisguised when we consider the ways the life worlds of...Indigenous people...whose capitalist 'value' does not depend on whether they are living or dead but only their fungibility and disposability." The food itself then becomes a means in which white settler colonialism asserts biopolitical control over

Chamoru bodies, where the prevalence of ingredients that degrade Indigenous health represents this idea of disposability.

The food also signifies the vanishment of Indigenous self-sufficiency as many Chamorus traditionally lived off the land. Since these landscapes were either stolen or destroyed by white settlers, Chamorus were forced to participate in capitalism. This lack of land is paralleled by financial insecurity, pushing Chamorus to locate cheaper food alternatives that are not necessarily nutritious.

## Indigenous Displacement

The ancient Chamorus are lauded as one of the best seafarers and navigators throughout history. The movement of Chamorus outside of their homelands following Spanish and American colonialism, however, is anything but a willing journey. According to Faye Untalan (2019), "Chamorro migration was spurred by three primary reasons: the call to military service, the pursuit of greater education, and the search for better opportunities." All are linked to white settler colonialism on the island, particularly through white settler appropriation of Chamoru land.

The influence of white settler colonialism is not only manifested in the material components of the fiesta, but also in tracing where the event occurs. The large-scale Liberation Day fiestas in San Diego, California, Houston, Texas, Baltimore, Maryland, and Las Vegas show the migration of Chamorus outside of the Mariåna Islands. Additionally, these diasporic celebrations are located in close proximity to military bases where generous numbers of Chamorus are often stationed. In this regard, not only is the occasion for the fiesta engaged with American militarization but it is also the reason that Chamorus are gathered outside of their homelands.



The fact that Chamorus are not conducting the fiesta in their homelands is a testament to Indigenous displacement, which is in large part a consequence of white settler occupation. The post-World War II era in Guam was dictated by an American naval government trying to rebuild the island into a military base. The naval government's theft of land destroyed Indigenous means for self-sufficiency that cornered Chamorus into enlisting in the United States military—the primary factor of Chamoru diasporic patterns during this time. Further, the difficulty in locating jobs and maintaining financial security in post-World War II Guåhan pressured Chamorus to move to parts of the United States with a lower cost of living. Even today, the number of diasporic Chamorus continues to increase as property mortgages and rental prices disadvantageously match the high housing allowance of white military stationed in Guåhan rather than leveling with local wages. Although framed in large part by the theme of militarism, the locations where the fiesta is celebrated outside the Mariånas is also indicative of Indigenous Chamoru displacement, which is a mode of white settler colonialism that is not often acknowledged.

## Indigenous Survivance

The fiesta, then, is a means in which the Chamorus continue this active and persistent form of resilience. Even when the fiesta is implicated by white settler colonialism, it has ultimately transcended into a site of survivance. As Guåhan's former Chamoru Governor Eddie Calvo stated, "That is what really gives Liberation Day its meaning- our unity as people. We, all of us, are part of what makes it a true celebration of our people, our freedom, and our island" (Sablan, 2017).

The fact that the fiesta continues to be celebrated by Chamorus today is a testament

to our resilience. The beauty of sharing recipes among family members and the passing down of secret flavors from generation to generation through oral tradition shows the continuity of Chamoru culture. The hospitality at the fiesta, whether it be through inviting strangers to eat or making enough food to balutan (packaged leftovers) shows the true neighborly values of Chamoru culture. Although it signals displacement, the existence of fiestas throughout the United States and even the world shows the courage and versatility of Chamorus to thrive outside their homelands. The Chamorus have reclaimed this tainted space and transformed the fiesta into one of the most beloved exhibitions of culture today. From table to plate, Chamoru people exist and continue to prosper wherever fiestas are the epitome of Indigenous survivance.

## CONCLUSION

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It is nearly impossible to conceptualize white settler colonialism without militarism in Chamoru culture. It is entwined by and through militarism and should not be undermined, but at the same time it should not be hypervisibilized as its sole face. As our ancestors looked to the stars for guidance, so must we seek to understand how white settler colonialism continues to shape our realities. The fiesta, as an extension of Chamoru culture, is one point of analysis that enhances our understanding of how white settler colonialism masks itself.

People constantly question the authenticity of Chamoru culture at almost every aspect, whether it be language, dance, or even in this case fiestas, is a fusion of non-Chamoru influence. I want to end by discussing how this supposed inauthenticity is in fact what makes tens of thousands of others and myself authentically Chamoru, as we are a people surviving, thriving, and resisting despite the most difficult conditions of white settler colonialism. The burden placed on Chamorus to legitimize our indigeneity after colonizers, one after the other, attempted to eradicate that part of our identity is purely colonial. Although this research analyzes fiestas as a site of white settler colonial continuity, it more significantly embodies the strength of Chamorus in transforming this space into one of celebrated survivance.

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# Ha'ani Lucia Falo San Nicolas

McNair Cohort: 2019

## Biography:

I am a Chamoru and Samoan UCSD alumna who graduated in 2019 with degrees in General Biology and Ethnic Studies. I was part of the UCSD Women's Division I Rugby Club, Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority, and Ethnic Studies Honors Thesis Program. I have been involved with AEP by being both a URS and McNair scholar. I am currently in the Political Science (Indigenous Politics) Ph.D. program at the University of Hawai'i, Mānoa. My goal is to become a researcher and professor of Pacific Island studies related courses in order to reassert and inspire Indigenous voices within Academia.

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