

PROJECT DESCRIPTION – CONTEMPORARY CULTURE IN THE MARIANAS

The Mariana Islands are a chain along the Marianas Trench in the Pacific, located south of Japan between the Philippines and Hawaii. This location places them squarely in Micronesia, one of three major ethnological groupings in Oceania. The Marianas include the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) and Guam, both U.S. territories that share an ancestral people, as well as customs, traditions, and history, including four centuries of colonial rule from Magellan's first arrival in Guam in 1521 to emancipation from the Japanese after WWII. While often brutal, these colonial occupiers contributed – directly and indirectly – to the cultural landscape of the Marianas. The impacts of these contributions continue to the present, and join a number of other influences, including formalized relationships with the United States, heavy immigration from Asia, and, of course, globalization and the rise of technology. All of these threads intertwine with the traditional customs of the local Chamorro and Carolinian populations to shape the unique and diverse cultural topography of the Marianas region today.

With this backdrop, our project, tentatively titled "Culture in the Marianas: Perspectives on the Present-day Landscape", will produce a book that considers the vital question, what is contemporary culture in the Marianas? What customs and factors are shaping life in the islands today? Take, for example, the recent success of the lifestyle and clothing company Tribe Marianas. The brand is among the most popular on Saipan, the largest and most populous island in the CNMI. Tribe, like a number of its peers popular in the Marianas region, has a focus on cultural pride, and its styles and identity draw on indigenous cultural traditions. Considering the popularity of Tribe Marianas and other such companies in the context of the present-day cultural landscape compels us to ask, how should this 'island pride' be construed? Is the popularity rooted in cultural pride, or the manifestation some other factor or factors? And what then might we make of it beyond the immediate cultural implications? Does it earmark a renewed dedication to sovereignty? A local determinism free from the U.S. government and military? Does it mark a generational divergence (since both the purveyors and purchasers of these products are overwhelming young people)?

To answer these questions, the book intends to provide a panoramic view of contemporary Mariana culture through an examination of the microscopic. So just as we might ask what fashion trends can tell us about cultural pride, we might also examine the plight of temporary status contract workers to understand the cultural amalgamation at work in the region, or examine how a hotly debated casino bill exposes fault lines between clans, generations, or classes, or investigate the consequences and causes of the Chamorro/Carolinian diaspora in the United States. The content for these micro-level inquiries will come from culturally relevant and representative narratives – both oral and written – from residents of the Mariana Islands, as well as articles or essays from scholars and writers. This non-academic book is intended for lay readers, will incorporate observation, analysis, narrative, interviews, and research, and will draw on diverse fields including anthropology, ethnology, ethnography, history, linguistics, and political science, among others.

The collection of voices that comprise the "Culture in the Marianas" book project will contribute to an understanding of the present day cultural landscape of the region. The completed book will be approximately 200 pages, or around 55,000 words. Scholars and citizens alike will be given room to express their perspectives on some aspect of Marianas culture. A broad range of themes will be represented, though the disparate themes will fall into one of three arenas: Vanishing Culture, Persisting Culture, and New and Synthesized Culture. The book plans to explore cultural dynamics in each of the inhabited islands of the Marianas chain (Saipan, Tinian, Rota, the Northern Islands, and Guam), as well as pan-Marianas themes. The completed manuscript will also include a preface, an introduction, local artwork and photographs of relevant cultural artifacts, endnotes, and applicable appendices.