

Forum

Bonds of Island Activism among CHamoru and Filipino Women on Guåhan

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As co-founders of the Filipina-led solidarity collective called Filipinos for Guåhan, the connections between U.S. militarization, feminism, and decolonization have been a crucial part of our personal and collective praxis.¹ Following the 2021 murder of 6 Asian American women in Atlanta, Georgia, we recognized that acts of violence against Asian American women have also increased throughout the United States. In response, we dedicated one of our Mabuhay Merienda events to the issue of gender violence in Guåhan. Mabuhay Meriendas—literally translated as “Welcome Snacks” in Tagalog—were informal and online monthly events that introduced social and historical topics of concern for our membership, from CHamoru-Filipino historical relations to intergenerational trauma.

While this event took place more than a year ago, on May 20, 2021, we find it imperative to reflect on its significance to this critical historical moment, wherein earlier this year the US Supreme Court overturned *Roe vs. Wade*.² Founding members Kristin Oberiano and Josephine Faith Ong explain that Mabuhay Meriendas function as monthly workshops and discussions “to discuss various community issues, including CHamoru-Filipino historical relations, talk story as healing from historical traumas, intergenerational experiences of Filipina women, and the importance of film and art for the Guåhan Filipino community” (Oberiano and Ong 2022). The panel, “Gathering to Confront Sexual Violence, Gender Violence, and Guåhan’s Militarization,” discussed the specific form gender and sexual violence takes in Guåhan’s highly militarized context. Panelists included our co-author Ong, I Hagan Famalão’an Guåhan member Lisa Natividad, Filipino feminist and policy consultant Nic Santos, and activist-scholar Gabriela Diaz. Filipinos for Guåhan’s mentor and activist-scholar Vivian Dames moderated the discussion, while founding member Tabitha Espina assisted with the coordination and online hosting.

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Each of our panelists are actively engaged in the work of island activism and discuss their various pursuits in organization, collaboration, and resistance. This conversation invoked the lens of island feminisms, coined by Karides, through its articulation of rich and resistant cultural forms, especially in how the panelists collectively rethink relationships to create new typologies of islands (Karides 2017, 30). The panelists described how the island and their work were bound by the constraints of what Espiritu, Lowe, and Yoneyama describe as “transpacific entanglements,” where U.S. imperialism forged Asia and the Pacific Islands together to form a settler-colonial, racialized, sexualized, and capitalist formation to expand Western domination, appropriation, and exploitation (Le Espiritu, Lowe, and Yoneyama 2017, 175). Rather than center militarized mappings of gendered domination and conquest across the Pacific, the panel focused on what Na’puti calls Oceanic (re)mappings of place that focus on the fluid and “interactive processes of belonging to and relations with *tano*’ [land] and *tåsi* [ocean].”³ Na’puti and Frain further explain that activism is tied together with the broader patterns of colonialism by centering resistance, or *minatanga*, as a site to understand the structures and processes of colonial power in the Pacific (Na’puti and Frain, 2017). In this way, interrelationship forms bonds for resistance.

We have organized this essay following the questions asked in the event to highlight the connections between gender and sexual violence, U.S. militarization, and CHamoru and Filipino people of marginalized genders in Guåhan. Rather than assume that these issues are discrete and can thus be solved separately, our organization purposefully chose to have a public conversation about their direct connections and overlap—specifically in how CHamorus and Filipinos are impacted by U.S. militarization’s gender and sexual violence in Guåhan. In the process, we emphasize the crucial role that feminist praxes and CHamoru-Filipino feminist solidarities should play in Guåhan’s decolonization. This rhetorical framing furthermore enacts a decolonial methodology of meaning-making that is fluid, reciprocal, deeply relational, and exigent.

What Role Does Gender and Sexual Violence Play within Guåhan's Highly Militarized Context?

Gender and sexual violence, as Dames pointed out, are historical struggles that are tied with the U.S. military’s presence in Guåhan: “This panel embodies this intergenerational struggle to make these connections and talk about these struggles” that have long been normalized under the system of U.S. military occupation (Filipinos for Guåhan, May 20, 2021). CHamoru and Filipino women, like Diaz, witness and testify to these overlapping oppressions: “I know from these experiences that militarization . . . or any kinds of extraction . . . you will have violence against women, and particularly against Native women and queer women” (Filipinos for Guåhan 2021). Ong explained the roots of violence against Asian women comes from “the longer history of U.S. imperialism in Asia, which influences how Asian women from militarized sites like South Korea, Vietnam, and the Philippines are treated in the continent. Acknowledging the importance of each militarized site’s sociopolitical context, Natividad reminded us that “violence is not acceptable in any form.”

Are There Any Connections between CHamoru and Filipino Women’s Struggles?

For the event’s Filipino panelists, U.S. militarization’s sexual and gendered violence in the Philippines could not be so easily separated from that of Guåhan. As Santos reflected, “A decolon[ial] approach is just to throw that question [about access to land and resources] out and formulate our own questions . . . how we want to create our own questions . . . without dividing our communities” (Filipinos for Guåhan 2021). This discussion, then, helps form the basis for the kinds of discursive action Santos calls for, which are actively co-constructed, rather than what the Chamorro historian Keith L. Camacho identified as a constructed academic and historical divide between Chamorro and Filipino colonial struggles and experiences (2016, 26). Thus, it is necessary to critically address issues of militarization and decolonization and point out how they affect a broad range of communities in Guåhan.

What role can solidarities between CHamoru and Filipino women play in Guåhan’s contemporary political climate?

In response to this question, panelists discussed how multiple systems of oppression like gender and race work together to pit communities against each other. As Natividad said, “Solidarity is the only way we’re going to achieve decolonization and everything that is connected to that” (Filipinos for Guåhan 2021). Connections, as Ong stated, include centering “indigenous sovereignty and reworking the relationship [between Filipino women and the Indigenous]. . . . Filipino women need an ongoing conversation about how we see CHamoru women and their leadership.” Santos further clarified the stakes of building Chamorro-Filipino connections: “These histories come back and visit us . . . and bring us back to our reality. . . . Coming together on these shared values is really what brings us together.” Here, Santos referred to CHamoru women that lead efforts to protect Guåhan’s sacred sites and environment and the Filipinos that support them and these causes. In this sense, what is shared is respect and care for Guåhan and its people, which motivates responsibility and collective advocacy.

Q&A

Finally, we held a Q&A with our audience, who were mainly CHamorus and Filipinos that were either part of community organizations or generally interested in knowing more about CHamoru-Filipino relations. The audience responded encouragingly, overall. Questions mainly came from Indigenous organizers who had previously been critiqued for centering Indigenous peoples’ rights and excluding Filipinos’ historical and contemporary struggles as predominantly working-class laborers in the tourism and military’s construction industries. Many attendees recognized the panelists’ vital contributions to CHamoru-Filipino solidarity work and Guåhan-based organizing and chose to mainly focus on CHamoru and Filipino queer and/or feminist organizers’ crucial role in building solidarities and collective movements in Guåhan. In response to further questions about CHamoru-Filipino solidarities, Diaz concluded that “Anti- and decolonial resistance movements, liberation movements, and sovereignty movements and how that

looks over our history . . . all those connections make a potent possibility for sovereignty . . . when we have a critical understanding of CHamoru place and history” (Filipinos for Guåhan 2021).

Centering CHamoru stories and practices do not necessarily erase Filipino struggles, as Ong observed that “We’re not erasing difference but learning to build with one another [and] how we can center different forms of communities” (Filipinos for Guåhan 2021). Therefore, CHamoru-Filipino solidarities envision and practice pathways for our collective liberation and decolonial futures. As Nic Santos said, centering Indigenous resurgence presents a hopeful rather than desolate possibility for Filipinos: “We’re building out our movement and diversifying it . . . and that’s something to find hopeful.” In this way, Santos directly confronts the horizontal hostility perpetuated by colonization and the scarcity perpetrated by neocolonial processes with the real possibilities afforded by collaboration.

To conclude, Dames unpacked some of her fears and discomfort doing island activism: “This isn’t about me. This isn’t about our experience. This is about the CHamorus.’ I thought about this a lot. We have so much shared pain, trauma, and cultural values, but we sometimes miss opportunities to draw upon them and those connections . . . to build solidarity” (Filipinos for Guåhan 2021).

Making Connections

Following our 2021 panel, we want to foster the connections between our communities and make connections between our work and current issues. We recognized the need to move toward the shared values and goals expressed by the panelists and audience. Through this event and other Mabuhay Meriendas, we hope to increase membership, facilitate more public engagement, and support Prutehi’s open-detonation and open-burning advocacy. We also recognize the ongoing work of our organization across multiple political and creative sites, such as the production of founding member Ruzelle Almonds’ film *It’s Like Halo Halo*, based on Espina’s research on intergenerational identity of Filipinos in Guåhan, and our recent testimony in support of the Guam Legislative Bill against open-burning and open-detonation. Together, we hope to reify bonds of solidarity that persist in resisting the bonds of militarized violence tied to the legacies of colonization that are woven into the everyday lives of our communities.

Notes

¹ We use the Tagalog term “Filipina” here to refer to Filipino women, while “Filipino” usually refers to men. Filipinos refers to a group of people of different genders. Alternate spellings mainly based on a continental U.S. context include the term “Filipinx,” which encompasses Filipinos of various gender identities. However, Filipinos for Guåhan chose to use the term “Filipinos” as an inclusive term for Filipinos from Guåhan and migrants from the Philippines that may use alternative, non-Tagalog terms to refer to people of marginalized gender identities. “Filipino” and “Filipina,” furthermore, are the terms with most common usage in the island.

² The 1973 U.S. Supreme Court case *Roe vs. Wade* enforced a federal right to abortion. Thus, the overturning of *Roe vs. Wade* has allowed individual states to decide their own abortion policies. This has led many conservative states to criminalize abortion.

³ Tiara R. Na’puti, “Archipelagic Rhetoric: Remapping the Marianas and Challenging Militarization from ‘A Stirring Place,’” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 16, no. 1 (2019): 9-10.

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