PhD Research Proposal

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Title of Research:

Map Biography of the Indigenous Landscapes and Seascapes in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands
Research Questions

This project calls on local Indigenous perspectives to establish use-and-occupancy patterns over time in Saipan: an island in the United States (U.S.) Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). It will address the following research questions:

• How can the mapping of Indigenous use-and-occupancy patterns contribute to an understanding of cultural continuity or the application of traditional knowledge?
• How have Indigenous use-and-occupancy patterns changed in the CNMI while under four different colonial powers?
• What repercussions have these colonial powers and policies had on Indigenous understandings of their own culture and stewardship of land and sea?

Study Area

The Mariana Islands in Micronesia are situated 2,400 kilometres east of the Philippines and 2,500 kilometres southeast of Japan. Consisting of fifteen islands, the Marianas arc in a north-south orientation for approximately 800 km (Spoehr 2000:20). The Mariana Islands are politically divided into two areas: Guam and a fourteen island archipelago called the CNMI (Office of Historic Preservation (OHP) 2011:1; Spoehr 2000:xxii; U.S. Department of the Interior 2010). Claimed by the U.S. in 1898, Guam is administered as an unincorporated territory of the U.S. and is the southernmost island in the Marianas. The CNMI is a self-governing Commonwealth under the U.S. In local discourse, the CNMI is commonly divided into the “northern” and “southern” islands (OHP 2011:1). The islands of Saipan, Rota and Tinian in the southern islands are the most populous. Of the nine northern islands (those north of Farallon de Medinilla) two islands have a combined population of 16 people, two are off-limits due to volcanic activity and the rest are uninhabited (OHP 2011:2). Saipan holds the most commercial and economic development and serves as the seat of the U.S. Commonwealth government (OHP 2011:1; Pelzer 1950:252; Spoehr 2000:xxii; U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) 2010). The fieldwork for this research will be conducted in Saipan.

This project focuses on the Indigenous community of the Mariana Islands. Originating from Southeast Asia and reaching the Marianas via the Philippines, the Chamorro people are the earliest-known inhabitants of the Mariana Islands and Micronesia as a whole. Archaeologists
and anthropologists have determined the Chamorro people inhabited the Mariana Islands for over 4,000 years (OHP 2011:2; Russell 1998:74; Spoehr 2000:2). Magellan was the first European to encounter the Marianas in 1521 and shortly after Spain claimed the islands in 1526. The Marianas became a European colony in 1668 with the establishment of the first Spanish mission on Guam. In an effort to centralize Spanish power and control any Chamorro backlash, the Spanish forced Chamorro people from the islands onto Guam (Bowers 2001:35; Spoehr 2000:23). Consequently, the majority of the contemporary CNMI was largely uninhabited for over 100 years. In the 1800s, Carolinian Islanders from a Micronesian island group south east of the Marianas resettled on Saipan, Tinian and Rota to access more fruitful land, and to provide the Spanish colonists with inter-island transportation (Bowers 2001:37; Spoehr 2000:39). It has been suggested that Chamorro people did not return to the northern islands until the late 1860s (Spoehr 2000:41).

After the Spanish-American War, the U.S. claimed Guam in 1898, while Germany purchased the Northern Mariana Islands (NMI) in 1899. The German agenda in the NMI was to use the area for the economic development of copra (Coomans 2000:4–5; Fritz 2001:1–5; Hezel 1983: 14, 48; OHP 2011:7; Spoehr 2000:6, 9–10, 12). Fifteen years later, Japan’s Navy seized the NMI in 1914 at the outbreak of World War I. At the end of the war, Japan made a formal claim on the NMI which the League of Nations acknowledged in 1921. In the 1920s Japan aimed to increase commercial development with the sugar cane industry, developing refining mills in Saipan, Tinian and Rota under the South Seas Development Company. In 1944, the United States under the code name Forager invaded Saipan and Tinian, defeating the Japanese forces. After World War II, Guam became an unincorporated territory of the United States while the NMI became the CNMI in 1976 signing a covenant allowing residents U.S. citizenship, self-governance, and federal programs (Higuchi 2001:19–22, 24, 31–32, 34; OHP 2011:9; Spoehr 2000:51–53). Today the CNMI is a commonwealth of the U.S.

**Justification**

In 1976, to compete with Western arrangements of boundaries and ownership, the Commonwealth put the CNMI Constitution in place to help Chamorro and Carolinian people become part of the capitalist system of ownership. Article XII of the CNMI Constitution states that all private lands be under Chamorro and Carolinian ownership. Land owners are not
allowed to sell, but can lease to non-Chamorro and non-Carolinian people. 2011 marks the year where this policy is under review. Recently, at a public hearing, local legislature has proposed to abolish Article XII, stating that the Indigenous people in the CNMI are now well educated and are able to make their own decisions regarding land ownership (Saipan Tribune 2011b). Others feel that abolishing Article XII means benefitting wealthy business people and eliminating Chamorro and Carolinian decision making in economic matters, effectively losing Indigenous culture in the CNMI (G. Cabrera, pers. comm., September 7, 2011; Saipan Tribune 2011a). Article XII will be decided on during the November 2012 federal election. This is a pivotal time in CNMI history and yet another change in the landscape and seascape. Land and sea use should be documented before any drastic changes to Indigenous ownership occur. Land and sea use documentation would be important at this point in time for comparative studies if Article XII were to be abolished.

Countries like Canada, Australia and even the continental U.S. have established Aboriginal land and sea rights and treaties for commercial, social, cultural and ceremonial purposes (LeRoy et al 2003:1-5; Macintosh et al 2009:23-25; Recksiek and Hinchcliff 2002:51-53). The U.S. Department of the Interior, the administrative body of the CNMI, Indian Affairs does not list the Chamorro or Carolinian populations in the CNMI as one of the 565 federally recognized American Indian tribes. Consequently, they are not entitled to any of the federal benefits, services or protection that comes with such recognition (U.S. DOI 2011a; U.S. DOI 2011b). The use-and-occupancy data gathered and mapped while undertaking this project also assists in potential land and sea tenure claims and potential negotiations for federal recognition.

Saipan’s Historic Preservation Office (HPO) manages all of the CNMI’s cultural resources. Unfortunately, the HPO suffers from a lack of funds, resources and support for cultural heritage protection from the government and the public and is currently operating without a staff archaeologist and historian (Coastal Resources Management n.d.; OHP 2011:24–28). This project can assist the HPO with the resource management of Indigenous sites. The maps composed as part of this research identify land and sea use and potential archaeological sites and provide a tangible link to Indigenous culture. Not only do these maps provide an enhanced awareness of Indigenous connection with the land, but can also become part of cultural resource management efforts at the HPO. The maps and any electronically-based data can be easily administered by the community, it provides the HPO with well-documented sites to aid in
monitoring and the maps can be easily displayed and used as educational pieces for the community (Tobias 2009:12). This project is multidisciplinary and has potential for expanding geographical areas and themes. It can become a long-term project for long-term research. Not only is this important work from an archaeological standpoint, but also from a CNMI resource management standpoint.

**Context**

This project is a continuation of community archaeology research initiatives launched in 2007 by archaeologist Jennifer McKinnon. McKinnon has been working with organizations such as the HPO, Coastal Resources Management, the Division of Environmental Quality and a number of community members in Saipan to develop a WWII maritime heritage trail. Community members expressed the need and desire to promote Saipan’s WWII heritage and through collaboration, archaeologists recorded a number of sites. Several students have worked on McKinnon’s project, producing a number of master’s theses from the data collected. In 2011, the author was also a part of this community archaeology initiative, collaborating with the same community members and organizations, conducting research and writing a master’s thesis on Indigenous seascapes. The project proposed will again collaborate with the same organizations and people and expand on the data collected on Indigenous seascapes in 2011.

The CNMI suffers from a lack of Indigenous archaeological and anthropological research. The contemporary literature and research regarding Indigenous peoples in Oceania and the Pacific as a whole often omits the Chamorro community due to the assumption that lengthy colonization has led to the demise of any “authentic” Indigenous culture (see for example D’Arcy 2006; Dobbin 2011). The research that does exist in the CNMI has an overwhelming focus on Chamorro origins and World War II. Consequently, the research lacks any significant and thoroughly structured ethnographic component. This lack of ethnographic, anthropological and archaeological perspectives hinders the development of community-based cultural education materials, resource stewardship strategies and political negotiation positions. This project employs ethnoarchaeological research strategies, focusing on interviews and recording contemporary local indigenous perspectives. The research adds a contemporary ethnographic component to the CNMI literature.
The Marianas have the longest period of colonization in Oceania (Diaz 2010:12). For over 400 years and while under four colonial powers, Indigenous land and sea use changed dramatically in the CNMI. Land was procured by those who could afford to purchase it and profit from it, taking away any land management from Indigenous groups on the islands. Landscape and seascape archaeology describe how the land and sea influence culture and how they can be manipulated into a cultural space (Bender 2002:135–137). The landscape is the stage for human interaction and is a large part of forming social and cultural identity (Yamin and Metheny 1996:xv). Approaching this study from a landscape perspective most adequately answers the research questions. Studying Indigenous relationships with the land and sea will record past and present land and sea use through the changes brought about by colonial powers, effectively tracing changes in cultural identity, adaptation and influence.

Yamin and Metheny identify that one of the problems associated with landscape archaeology rests in the lack of interplay of past and present cultural practices (1996:xv). Cultural geography can assist with this problem. Thematically mapping cultural traits not just identifies sites of significance, but can create layers of meaning for comparative purposes (1996:xvi). Cultural geography can provide a “timeline” of sorts mapping land-use from historical data, previous archaeological evidence of everyday landscape and contemporary ethnographic data and oral histories. This allows for an examination of land-use from past to present.

Another way of combating the lack of connectivity between past and present is to employ ethnoarchaeological research strategies, which, as previously mentioned, is part of this project (David and Kramer 2001:33). Ethnoarchaeological strategies are meant to provide better ethnographic analogies to assist in the interpretation of past archaeological data (David and Kramer 2001:43).

**Methodology**

Past use-and-occupancy in the Marianas is primarily documented by early explorers, missionaries and colonial administrators. Previous research from 2011 has identified that many Chamorro and Carolinian people remember the ways their family used and occupied the land over time. Local residents indicate oral histories on Saipan would go back to the Japanese Period, perhaps even the late Spanish period (G. Cabrera, 2011, pers. comm. October 25, 2011).
This project will conduct the original research needed to construct a map-biography for the island of Saipan. The map-biography has been used to map use-and-occupancy patterns in Canada since 1998 and in Australia since 2006 (Tobias 2009:16–17, 344). Map-biographies have proven to be effective methods of cultural mapping of Indigenous groups including First Nations and Aboriginal Australian communities. Researchers have also used the map biography to help establish land and sea rights in Native Title determination cases. So far the map biography has concentrated on North American and Australian communities without government opposition. Several African and Asian governments have outlawed the type of information gleaned from using map biography methodologies (Tobias 2009:12). Expanding its use into Pacific Island communities under the Commonwealth would be possible and an easy way to further the benefits of the map-biography. This project will provide new knowledge on Indigenous land and sea use in the most populous island in the Northern Marianas. This research will also explore the social impacts of this development on the Indigenous peoples of the CNMI.

The map biography is “an account of a person’s life on the land, sea or ice, as recorded on a map (and audio recording) during a face-to-face interview” and is used to determine the limits of a person’s or groups landscape or seascape (Tobias 2009:38). Map-biographies can be used to map several themes from fishing, traditional ecological knowledge to harvesting patterns. The map biography for this project is meant to convey a particular territory (Saipan) and specific places that people have used for particular activities. It measures the extensivity of the activities and places.

Methods for this project include interviewing roughly one hundred eligible Chamorro and Carolinian people on Saipan and mapping each person’s account. Prior to interviewing ethics approval and consent from each interviewee will be obtained.

Well thought out questionnaires are key to the success of the project. A large portion of the project will be devoted to analysing previous studies and ensuring that the questions are consistent with the project’s primary objectives. A detailed questionnaire for each interview will be developed. Each question will be time-period specific and be based on categories gathered from historical, ethnographic and archaeological documentation of Chamorro and Carolinian activities. Questionnaires will be developed with key words and cues to help the interviewer to stay on track.
Respondents will be recruited through notifications in community newspapers, public seminars and assistance from Chamorro residents and the HPO; groups that the author has previously worked with on the island of Saipan. The sample will include men and women who must meet the following criteria:

1. Be of self-defined Chamorro or Carolinian descent.
2. Have had their principle residence in the Mariana Islands.
3. Be 21 years of age or older.
4. Be physically and mentally capable of participating.
5. Have within living memory recall of land and sea use and occupancy.

All interviews will be voice-recorded. Maps, plastic overlays, markers and codepieces for placing on maps during interviews will be used.

Once maps have been constructed and interviews transcribed, respondent side sessions will be conducted with the original respondents to verify data. This will be conducted through several small group sessions. Interviewers will return the preliminary maps to the original respondents to check that the information has been documented accurately, to provide feedback and confirm participation.

Similar to archaeologist Polly Weissner’s 2002 study on oral histories in Papua New Guinea, this project may be able to construct genealogies to estimate the chronological sequence of events. From 2011 research we know that the heads of five families returned to Saipan after the concentration of Chamorro people on Guam in 1668: the Borhas, the Cruz’, the Camachos, the Cabreras, DeLeon Guereros (G. Cabrera, 2011, pers. comm. April 23, 2011). It may be possible to construct similar genealogies.

Interviews will be supplemented by previous historical and archaeological studies and previously recorded oral histories. GIS software such as ArcGIS will be used in the final stages to help process the data.

An analysis report will be distributed to the community and a final presentation of map-survey findings will occur at the end of research.

Limitations

Methodological limitations for this project lie in type of data collected. The project relies primarily on self-reported data from interviews. Peoples’ responses can be biased, selective,
recalled for the incorrect time period and exaggerated. Self-reported responses are difficult or rarely independently verified. The data used in map-biographies does have the capability to be verified, by using groundtruthing. Groundtruthing involves site visits and using global positioning system tracking devices. Although possible, groundtruthing would render new data from the respondents due to description precision during site visits, involve more technical skills, make the project more expensive, having extreme longitudinal effects (Tobias 2009:315–316).

Access to people may also be a limitation for this project. Despite efforts to contact people in Saipan, reaching willing participants may take longer than expected. If access is limited, it raises another researcher limitation. The length of time required to access people may have longitudinal effects and may decrease the amount of time devoted to carrying out interviews. Additionally, even with access to people, there is always the chance that during interviews, people may also be reluctant to participate and divulge information to researchers they have never met before or to share information for various reasons. The relationships already established with the community since 2007 help to alleviate some of the limitations regarding unfamiliarity and trust. Flinders University’s presence in the CNMI for the past four years may help with trust and access to people. However, even with successful relationships, respondents may have an agenda in mind that differs from the goal of the research.

A large part if the research is interviewing people. Detailed questionnaires and skilled interviewers are essential to obtaining data for this project. This project has the opportunity to hire student interviewers to conduct some of the interviews. Although this would be an excellent field school opportunity for students, interviewers need to be carefully trained, effectively increasing project time. If interviewers are not competent, the principal investigator may have to conduct all interviews.

This research may also be criticized for relying too heavily on ethnohistorical data. To help mitigate this, the project will involve an extensive literature review of previous archaeological and historical studies, which will be considered and incorporated into the maps.
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