

TRADITIONAL LYRICS OF THE NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS
.....THAT ONCE DEFINED ITS CULTURE
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"When I have said that the inhabitants of the Marianas have no passions, I was wrong, for there is one that dominates them, subjugates them, that forms part of their existence. . . . I am referring to their music. . . . The Marianao is musical more by nature than by instinct. He sings when he gets up, he sings while he works, he sings while bathing, and sings until he sleeps. His language is almost music. . . . At times you hear a Spanish bolero or some Castilian seguidillas, but this is the exception to the general rule."

–Santiago Arago, 1851

"Their airs are languishing, harmonious, and for three voices; there are also two or three boleros and some seguidillas but in general they prefer that which lulls and composes to that which animates and enlivens; for their singing may be considered in some measure an emblem of their life. . . . The national couplets are always composed in honor of some saint or Paradise, or to celebrate some great event, such as the arrival of a ship. Our coming awoke the slumbering muse of the poet of the place; and we often heard songs, the burthen of which related to our voyage, and to some persons of the expedition; and which, if they did not indicate talents, were at least an evidence of a turn for satire."

–Santiago Arago, 1819

As noted by early travellers, music was important to the Chamorro people. And it still is. It is in their blood and souls as in early times, and it a social order where mores, manners, and even daily news events were transmitted and discussed in musical phrases. In the Northern Mariana Islands in 1972, when I first arrived, a young highschool graduate was almost an exception who did not play the guitar (by ear), sing, or even compose songs that he would sing on social occasions – and I wrote: "Though American rock and country music are the paradigm that sets the beat and pulse of their tunes, there remains a strange and haunting quality, like a historic marker, that distinguishes this music from that on imported tapes; for local musicians and listeners, born and raised to the sound of traditional island music, cannot, even though they might try, rid their musical thoughts of this heritage. Though local musicians seek the destructive dissonance and volume of disco, they are unable to dissemble completely, and occasionally a strange and foreign sweetness appears that seems to recall a time when musical patterns and their lyrics defined and prescribed a way of life that is now fading."

What was this traditional music whose vitality is such that it, after a generation of neglect and discredit, can still make itself heard through a tempest of disco beat; and when performed in pure form (very, very seldom) can command a moment of respectful attention from all listeners?

To answer that question is one purpose of this study. Another purpose is to record those lyrics that still exist in the memories of several old people on Rota who are (with a few peers on Saipan and Guam) the sole practitioners of this one once-pervading, lively art of chamorrita singing; for it is believed that these remenants, more than all printed historic documents, portray the actual way lives

were once lived and felt on these islands; and that here within the compact texts of these songs is the key to the devotion and rigor and license that once invested island lives with wonderful humanity. . . . Listen to the accompanying tapes, read their texts in the appended vernacular or English versions, then ask yourself: does documentation exist elsewhere that so well recreates the essence of a culture whose loss everyone laments, but which few seek to preserve?

A description of the area is in order. . . . The Northern Mariana Islands are part of an archipelago in the far Western Pacific that on maps designates the junction of the Pacific Ocean with the Philippine Sea. Saipan, the metropolis and government headquarters, and nearby Tinian, and isolated, lonely, traditional Rota are the principle, inhabited islands. Guam, though politically unrelated, is the southern tip of the archipelago and its people are kin to the Chamorro population of the Northern Marianas. Small and underpopulated (by popular standards), the Northern Marianas would be insignificant in world affairs save for the fact that ever since Magellan's inadvertent and poorly documented discovery of them, they have been the point of intersection and bitter confrontation of great powers struggling to dominate the Pacific area, in course of which the previous history and cultural attainments of these islands were reduced to the rubble of a few artefacts, including bits and pieces of musical heritage.

The Spanish, Germans, Japanese, and Americans have taken their historic turns in administering and exploiting these islands; each adding to, subtracting from and synthesizing with its own culture, the ways of island life, the Spanish having been the most ardent and definitive. Though, in their fervor, the Spanish removed almost all traces of antecedent religion, historic myths, and facts, they also introduced so much of themselves – bloodlines, religious faith, expanded vocabulary, mores, social behavior – that a valid Chamorro-Spanish renaissance seems to have occurred which possessed such power and durability that it has survived each successive occupation, and still distinguishes the social order of these islands from all others,

Particular attention must be paid to a description of Rota because it is the site for this study: Rota, small island that rises suddenly out of the sea and ascends into the clouds . . . Rota with its rocky shores and the rough sea-miles that seal it from Saipan, Tinian, and Guam . . . Rota, the natural haven for renegades from Guam during Spanish times, just as ever since it has been the natural haven for a purer, antique Chamorro language and the high manners of the Chamorro-Spanish renaissance! It can be regarded as a sort of 'archives' of the Northern Marianas. . . . A Saipan resident visits Rota and for him it is like an English speaker returning to the times of Spencer. . . . Though even in Rota times are changing and each death of an older citizen disproportionately diminishes the cultural wealth of all citizens; for instance, during the course of this study one important chamorita singer died, thus voiding a number of songs that should have been recorded and saved.

Rota, then, is a natural site for the study because acculturation has been less destructive on this island than elsewhere in the Marianas; and it is recognized that few chamorrita lyrics exist elsewhere in the Northern Marianas that are not also known here. Another reason for selecting Rota is that I live here and, being an elder citizens myself, enjoy on-going relationship with the elder citizens who gather each day at the senior Citizens Center to play bingo; gamble; speak to each other in their earthy, classic Chamorro which is only partially understood by younger generations; sing; and deplore the economic and social changes that threaten their stable, traditional lives. Why stable lives? Why have their lives been stable up to this point? Geography, of course, explains part of it, for being 'out of

sight and out of mind' has slowed 20th Century developments here. But I call attention to another factor: the influence of a body of chamorrita songs which is still sufficiently intact to exert its potency; for not only does it contains songs of courtship (noted below), but songs that designate the very essence of the Chamorro system of loyalties, faith, and behavior; and each time these people sing them, they are celebrating the grandeur of their heritage and their abiding faith in the ancient, proven precepts that, up to this point, have given stability to clan and family and church relations; and that confer special nobility to those who, like themselves, seek to perpetuate them. To chamorrita admirers this collection is like a holy relic to be fondled, worshipped, and passed on to their descendants – if only, of course, the descendants can be induced to listen, but this is another matter.

On Rota the catchall name for traditional songs is chamorrita. Many songs of later vintage exist but these are often set to American or Japanese melodies and have little resemblance to music that might be regarded as truly ethnic.

Those who prefer precise designations for traditional songs will reserve the term 'real' chamorrita for songs that are (or originally were) improvised by two singers (usually one male, one female) before an audience, as opposed to those sung by a single person, irrespective of improvisation. The latter they would simply call Chamorro songs. With the passage of time this distinction has become blurred and no longer seems useful, and it seems best to use the catchall name and refer to all early songs as chamorrita. In a moment I will attempt to vindicate this decision, but first let me describe 'real' chamorrita songs as they are known in their pure and most restrictive form, by citing phrases from a paper presented by Kim Bailey before the 26th Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology: "Chamorrita are ancient folk songs arranged in quatrains of two octosyllabic couplets. . . . The distinctive features are improvisation and dialogue performance between two or more people, depending on the occasion and function. . . . Structurally chamorrita are composed of quatrains . . . with the last words of the second and fourth rhyming. Textwise the second couplet is not always related to the first, just as successive quatrains do not always match. Relatedness of succeeding couplets and quatrains mark the skill of the performer. . . . There is usually a slight pause between two couplets and a longer pause between quatrains, probably due to the thinking [or remembering] process of improvisation. . . . The rhythmic meter supports the poetic, so given the pauses and fermatas, the pulse is not always constant – lines being shortened by a half-beat or lengthened by fermatas or embellishments or accelerated according to individual style or emotion of the passage. . . . One of the primary functions of chamorritas was to communicate, especially in the courtship game. As recently as the teen-age years of some of the Chamorro elders, the opportunity of males to speak with females was strictly limited. Girls were not permitted to leave the house to speak with boys, and seldom ventured out without a chaperon. Not surprisingly a certain style of 'double-talk' developed, almost incomprehensible to non-teen-agers. . . . The chamorritas of today appear to have absorbed the poetic structures and melodic scales of the Spanish and Mexican romances of the 17th and 18th centuries; yet retained the jesting, competitive, and improvisatory style of the pre-contact chamorrita, resulting in a 'remodeled' chamorrita with a dialogue form, preset in poetic scheme, and a poetry-dictating musical meter."

I think that Kim Bailey meant not 'chamorritas of today', but chamorritas that evolved during the period of Chamorro-Spanish renaissance, for 'today' the art of improvisation has nearly disappeared [Though it should be noted that the elder citizens on Rota did sing improvised (no doubt 'real') chamorritas while weaving a huge mat to commemorate the pope's visit to Guam a decade or so ago]

and song texts are remembered imperfectly and often only in part so that it becomes impossible to tell which ones were originally part of an improvised dialogue. Traditional melodies are freely exchanged from one song to another, depending on the singer's impulse and are no help in identification, and neither is the poetic form, for nearly all songs ('real' chamorrita or otherwise) conform to the format of quatrains and their rhymed endings as described above. For these reasons I shall make no attempt to separate 'real' chamorrita from other ancient Chamorro songs. The people on Rota make no such separation and do not judge their worth on such basis.

On Rota, however, another kind of distinction does exist that would be of immense importance save for the fact that only one song is known to exist to which it applies. The word that designates this concept is oku, meaning ancient with connotation that implies indigenous Chamorro free from foreign influence. Only a few old people recognize the word; and only one of them, a singer, uses it to designate the authenticity of a melody. This ancient Chamorro word and the singer who uses it will be identified on the tape when he sings.

The collected chamorrita songs, which represent the core of this study, were recorded at Rota's Program for the Aged, and at public chamorrita song fests, and sometimes singly when a singer was taken to a quiet place to perform. Since the art of improvisation has been lost, none of these songs were improvised at time of taping. In each instance, however, the singer believed that the song had been originally created in this way, often centuries ago, and had survived thousands of other improvised songs because of its excellence and special meaning to singers of successive generations – a winnowing process that seems to proclaim artistic and cultural merit, at least to those of Chamorro lineage.

Translation has been difficult, just as it is for all poetry, but translation of chamorritas is particularly hazardous, for a generation gap now exists in the language that separates older citizens from their descendants, and a grandparent speaking to descendants – even college-educated descendants – must resort to simplification of language such as in English one uses with preschoolers; accordingly, these songs in the vernacular are as difficult to understand as poems in Spenserian English are for a modern-day English speaker. But there are even greater difficulties: these songs were originally composed for audiences that were sophisticated in ancient island ways and who delighted in double-meanings, cue words, and innuendoes that are incomprehensible to the present generation; and word-for-word translations can come out as bare and simple-minded as any Jack and Jane tale in a first grade primer. It is fortunate that the primary translator for this study, Gerald Calvo, knew this and compensated by prying the soloist with searching questions as to obscure meanings. Even so, word-for-word translations are usually insufficient and an attempt has been made to take one step beyond literal translation and to restore some of the poetic depth of meaning, some of the original lilt, and, in many instances, the original pattern of rhyme. . . . So much for the lyrics.

Three distinct traditional chamorrita melodies exist on Rota and constitute the musical structure for all chamorrita lyrics. [Since writing this I have come on a rather indefinite, difficult to identify melody]. All are in diatonic scale and are in 2/4 or 4/4 time except when a single measure, to match the lyric, is changed to 3/4 time. The melodies are regarded as vehicles for the lyrics and are modified freely and with vigor, sometimes unmercifully, and often imaginatively and in good taste to support the words. The control that melodies exert over the lyrics is less obvious, though surely a singer who regards one or more of these melodies as a birthright must be emotionally conditioned

to the musical phrases, and choose words and phrases that fit their structure and their pleading. One of the three melodies includes a coda. Obviously lyrics must be shaped so as to conform to this structure.

Are these melodies derived from Spanish or Mexican folk tunes as is usually assumed? When played on the recorder in strict time, they seem quite unSpanish to me. On the other hand there is a sophistication about them that would seem to have required a broader musical background than a small, isolated island community could provide. But perhaps I am wrong. Listen to the complex variations and embellishments that are used by several singers and that must have been learned from listening to each other (do not let their aged and sometimes out-of-tune voices distract you) and ask yourself if people with such ability were not as well equipped as Spanish, Mexican or Philippine peasants to create their own folk music? . . . But here I am intruding into the field of ethnomusicology where I have no talent.