

## T A P E T E X T

### TRADITIONAL MUSIC OF THE NORTHERN MARIANAS

W. M. Peck

This is an attempt to record the lyrics and melodies of most of the chamorritas that still exist on Rota in the Northern Marianas. I would pay homage to the chamorrita heritage for it alone among historic documents and academic facts allows Chamorro ancestors to speak in their own words (and almost in their own voices) of life on these islands when such high level of cultural attainment existed that poetical expression was part of every day speech, a time when the blending of Chamorro and Spanish skills, mores, faiths, and loyalties formed the characteristics that have ever since identified indigenous people of the Northern Marianas as Chamorro. It was a time of true renaissance. Also it was a time of critical change, and people sought the poetical form of chamorrita to express their private misgivings, their most ardent hopes and beliefs and passions, and to establish rules of conduct and decorum that they thought should rule their lives. . . . This is the heritage that ancestors have bequeathed this generation.

The lyrics of the collected chamorritas and the manner in which they were originally improvised have been shown in the foregoing text. Let it be noted here that they are as varied in purpose and content as were the concerns and skills of those who composed them. On the other hand, the melodies to which they are set on Rota are just three in number – a limitation that might seriously handicap less ingenious people; but not Rota chamorrita singers who responded to the challenge by inventing all sorts of embellishments, by enriching or simplifying a passage, and by lengthening or shortening a melody line as suited their artistic whim of the moment.

One may ask: were Rota chamorrita singers, over the course of centuries, restricted to three melodies because no others were available? Probably not, for there seems to have been a flood of lilting Spanish melodies to choose from, just as there is now a flood of American melodies. I would rather believe that these three melodies were the repertoire of the early ancestors who established and popularized the art of chamorrita singing on Rota (this is not to discount their possible Spanish origin), and that their authority has carried over the centuries, and would label the use of any other melody a fraud. . . . There is a rigidity and purity in the way these classic chamorrita singers regard their art, and I doubt if any of them would now risk innovations beyond those which have been established by long usage.

Of these melodies, one is used more commonly than the others, in fact, most young people believe that it is the only one. The score of this melody, in one of its many variations, is printed in the accompanying text. Its base melody line has been given some embellishments, and it will be noted that the singer, from whom this score was copied, uses charming musical 'licks' (shown as 32nd notes in the score) to emphasize (or soften) high notes.

This melody will first be played on the recorder.

Mrs. Ursula Hocog Atalig will now sing the first two quatrains of this chamorrita – the full vernacular text and English translation of which are given in the accompanying text under her name and listed as No. 1. This recording was made at the Program for the Aged. As is their custom, her peers will join in with her on the last several words of the 2nd and 4th lines.

This basic melody is used in countless variations, some of which become almost unrecognizable as its siblings. Here is an example. It is shown to the accompanying score. This is sufficient melody for only two lines, and it is repeated intact, or with slight variation to complete the quatrain. On the recorder it sounds like this.

Mrs. Bartola Ogo now sings it as her aunt, Clementina Manglona, used it in Japanese times to support the lyrics she composed while singing (and working) in a cotton field. The purpose of the lyrics was to tease a coworker who had become pregnant while playing a game of hide-and-seek on Clementina's farm. Here is Mrs. Ogo:

This is an unusually interesting chamorrita, not so much for its music as for its lyrical form. This has been fully discussed in a foregoing text, and here I will merely state that this work song was improvised in the intriguingly complex manner of a Malayan pantoum. Also it is interesting because it can be dated. Of the two female workers whose names are mentioned, Maria is alive though blind and severely disabled. [Alive, that is, when these comments were written in the early 80s.] The vernacular and literal versions are given in the accompanying text under the singer's name, and listed

as No. 1.

The second melody is more complex and has a distinct coda. It is less flexible and the coda ending demands a summary or resolving statement of the lyrics that have preceded it. This would require unusual ability of a performer when improvising before an audience. First, the recorder will play the score.

Mrs. Rosina Atalig will now sing the entire chamorrita. It will be noted that she increases the complexity of embellishments as she progresses from one quatrain to the next. Those who follow the score while she sings will note that she is including some additional lines over those that were printed in the score. My impression is that the melody, in this instance, dominates and controls the

substance and emotion of the lyrics. And I want to read the lyrics to you and ponder them for a moment.

Man speaks  
Pretty one  
O my pretty one  
Comfort thy head on my shoulder  
So I may instruct thee in sympathy  
Though our love grows colder

Woman speaks  
Do not think, Once-My-Dear-Love  
That abandoning will make me sad  
For there'll be glory in my heart  
As I fly the wind, no longer sad

Man Speaks  
You're there. I'm here. we're far apart  
We don't see each other's eyes  
O bear the pain we share, Love  
As jealousy, defeated, dies

Woman Speaks  
The wind  
I feel the wind  
It is coming from the North  
It is blowing steadily and harsh  
And changes, O changes, Northwest

Woman Speaks  
Painful, painful is the wind  
Coda            Painful at the root of my heart  
This is where I feel pain, Love  
For my children of the wind

This is a conversation between two lovers. It begins as a lover's quarrel and threatens break-up and abandonment, which, however, seems to be resolved by use of an obscure metaphorical device which might, if we really understood it, do honor to a modern abstract poet. I should explain that 'wind', in Chamorro usage, signifies illicit sex and bastardy. No one recalls the particular significance of a Northwind which shifts to the Northeast, though I do not doubt its significance; but like a superb classic poem, rationality is not as important as the abiding conviction it gives that layers of emotion exist that would have involved us similarly if we had been there. As I go back and listen again and again to the coda, I sense that it possesses an air of sublime finality, and that this – even more than the singer's intent – may have inspired this final flight into ecstasy.

The third chamorrita melody is the private domain of just one singer who has inherited it from a line of ancestor-singers which, he believes, extends without deviation to pre-Spanish antecedents. The term that he uses to designate it is almost a private term for only a few of the most knowledgeable elders are comfortable enough with it to use it. This term is oku', which means ancient and connotes ethnic purity. The singer, Rudolfo Mundo, regards the word oku' almost as a relic that should be handled with care. It applies, he says, to just one melody, and also to just one chamorrita quatrain that he delights to sing with it, though actually he uses this oku' melody for most of the chaorrita songs he recalls from his youth. Here is the musical score as played on the recorder.

This is a bold melody that seems especially suitable for the aggressive or taunting themes which characterizes many of Mr. Mundo's lyrics. Rudolfo Mundo now sing this uko[ melody using the words from the only song he regards as authentically uko'. These words will be found under his name in the accompanying text and are listed as No. 1.

You have been hearing recordings of Rota chamorritas as they were sung self-consciously before a microphone. This is misleading, for a microphone squelches the excitement and the very essence of what a true chamorrita song fest is really like. No Rota citizen, listening to the recordings you have just heard, is going to get carried away by them as if he were in a Tennessee campmeeting revival.

But listen, for a moment, to singing that was recorded surreptitiously at a Rota song fest, and know that here is pure chamorrita, here is the strength and frenzy it can generate from generation to generation, somehow instilling in all participants a concept of how life is to be lived on this island.

Here are several excerpts from a song fest. The recording is miserable, as you will hear, and the singing is sometimes overwhelmed by passing trucks. But I think you will get the idea.

Listen to such a real chamorrita songfest, then reflect for a moment: is not chamorrita singing an ingredient of Chamorro culture that up to now has assured continuity of ethnic characteristics through their insistent melodies and lyrics and communal enthusiasm.