The Racialization of the People of Guam as Second-Class Citizens

By Monica Civille

The United States took control of Guam as a part of the Treaty of Paris in the aftermath of Spanish-American War in 1898. Since then, they have treated the island and its inhabitants as a colony, despite the United States’ overt anti-colonialism viewpoint. The treatment that Guam has dealt with for over one hundred years has done damage to the island and caused great harm to its people. The culture and traditions of the indigenous people of Guam have been sacrificed for the “greater” American goal. While the United States takes full advantage of the geographic location of this island for military purposes, it continues to undermine the rights of those living in Guam. This paper will focus on the ways in which the United States has racialized the people of Guam as second-class citizens through the process of colonization.

Before delving into the discussion, it is important to define certain terms for the purposes of this paper. The term Guamanians refers to any permanent resident of Guam despite their racial or ethnic background. Chamorros are the native or indigenous people of Guam. While Guamanians are now recognized as American citizens, when the term “American” is used, it will usually refer to Americans from the mainland United States, unless otherwise specified. The term haole is used for white Americans living on Guam. The word originates from Hawaii and means “foreigner.”

Guam is located in the western Pacific and is the southernmost and largest island in the archipelago of Mariana Islands. It has been documented that the ancient Chamorros who inhabited the island were able to establish an organized and complex society that included cultural traditions and customs, an oral history, and a native language. Their first contact with the western world occurred in 1521 when the Spanish first “discovered” Guam. They proceeded to claim the island as a possession of Spain and began colonizing it in 1668. The Spanish intended to civilize the Chamorro people through the introduction of Christianity and various other western customs. When the Chamorros realized that their way of life was being threatened, a series of uprisings began between the natives and their Spanish colonizers that lasted for roughly 30 years.

Under Spanish control, the population of Chamorros was reduced from an estimated 50,000 to a mere 3,500 by the early 18th century. In addition to losing a large percentage of their population, Spanish customs and traditions had encroached on the native culture through the process of colonization. Intermarriage was a critical tool that the Spanish used to dilute the Chamorro blood and infiltrate the lifestyles of natives. The degree of survival that Chamorros and their culture have maintained to this day, despite the intrusive influences from the Spanish and later the Americans, is truly remarkable.

After falling under power of the U.S. government, Guam went through a process where its classification was highly debated among government officials. The tradition of eventual statehood was terminated with the acquisition of territories from the Treaty of Paris. The primary motivation for this change was the racial makeup of these newly acquired territories. Because they did not have white

---

1 Laurel Anne Monnig, “‘Proving Chamorro’: Indigenous Narratives of Race, Identity, and Decolonization on Guam” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007), 376.
majorities, the inhabitants of Guam were believed to be uncivilized and savage.

Peter Smith concludes that the United States policy shifted away from incorporation because the new territorial areas were perceived unsuitable for European immigration or were already populated by people of indigenous, African, or Iberian heritage… white American colonists did not have an interest in inhabiting lands occupied by perceived savages…[A member of Congress noted that] “[t]hey have nothing in common with us and centuries cannot assimilate them.”

While this may no longer be the present-day opinion regarding Guam, it is these archaic attitudes that continue to set the precedent setting Guamanians apart from the rest of America.

Before the Organic Act of Guam was passed, the U.S. Navy controlled the island in order to position itself in a strategic location. Once the Naval base was established, the Federal government appointed a Naval officer as the governor of Guam. Under the Naval administration, Guam was ruled in a strict and militaristic manner. During this time, the goal was to “Americanize” the inhabitants of Guam without giving them any American rights or legal recognition. Local Chamorros were not allowed to participate in the government in any form, but were still bound by Naval rule in ways that even impacted their personal lives.

By 1907, Jim Crow laws which mandated racial segregation in schools and public spaces were implemented. English-only, American-style was compulsory, while the English language was pushed on Chamorros in a variety of other cultural arenas. The Chamorro language was forbidden on school grounds, and in 1922 Chamorro-English dictionaries were burned. (This English-only policy continued until the 1960s.)

“Only concerned with their own goals, [the United States] completely disregarded the traditions and customs of Chamorros.”

This is just one example of the extremes that the American government went through in the effort to Americanize the Chamorro people. Other laws included “strict limitation of alcohol use, the outlawing of the ringing of church bells too early in the morning, to ‘improving’ health care, hygiene, and diet…” The absurdity of these laws speak to the actions and intentions of the United States. Only concerned with their own goals, they completely disregarded the traditions and customs of Chamorros. Anything that was considered a possible impediment to the Navy’s objectives was suppressed.

The United States government was able to achieve all of this without any say or real fight from the Chamorros because of the precedent set in *Downes v. Bidwell*. In this Supreme Court case, the Court stated that the United States Constitution did not apply to the territories of the United States in the same manner that it applied to the states, thus denying inhabitants of the territories their basic rights under the Constitution. This decision supported the doctrine of Congress’s “plenary power” over the territories. The Court’s decision was entirely rationalized on the basis of racism and xenophobia. “The Court found that ‘Anglo-Saxon principles’ of government and justice would be

---

4 Román, *Other American Colonies*, 24-27.
5 Quan, “Respeta I Taotao Tano,” 4.
7 Monnig, "Proving Chamorro," 85.
8 182 U.S. 244 (1901).
9 Román, *Other American Colonies*, 98.
virtually impossible to apply to ‘alien races’ differing in ‘religion, custom, and modes of thought.’”

Denying the protection of the Constitution is a strategy that the United States has used to maintain control over Guam and sustain its colonial status. The Constitution is such an integral document that it serves as the backbone of the United States. It is impossible to form any argument that an individual can be considered a full citizen without the protection of the Constitution.

Under the United Nations Charter, territories have options granted to them that concern their future state of affairs. One of these options is self-determination. “Resolution 545, adopted in 1952, recognized ‘the right of people and nations to self-determination as a fundamental human right.’” This right to self-determination is defined as “the right of a people or a nation to determine freely by themselves without outside pressure their political and legal states as a separate entity.” The U.S. has consistently been an advocate of “the emancipation of peoples under colonial rule.” The right to self-determine is in direct conflict with colonial rule but is based off of the belief that people have a right to be in charge of their own destinies.

“Despite America’s vocal position in agreement of the right of self-determination, the [U.S.] has yet to fully grant that right to any of its territories”

Despite America’s vocal position in agreement of the right of self-determination, the United States has yet to fully grant that right to any of its territories. Instead the United States has done quite the opposite. “[They have] reserved the right to declare that some people were not yet ‘worthy of’ or ‘ready for’ self-determination.” This provides the federal government with the authority to refuse requests for self-determination, a power it has used frequently with Guam, impeding Guam’s right to self-determination or even change its status to a Commonwealth, which would be at least one step up from the status of an unincorporated territory. Guam has faced obstacles when trying to obtain self-determination because of disagreements that have arisen between Chamorros and other local Guamanians. The federal government focuses on these disputes to support its refusal to grant alternative means of government for Guam while it continues to exploit the island for its own benefit.

Self-determination can almost be considered a myth because of its implausibility. Given the strategic military advantage that Guam provides the United States, there is no conceivable reason for the federal government to voluntarily give their control and power.

To ensure that its territories do not take advantage of this option, the United States often dangles in front of them the carrot of the maintenance of relative economic prosperity under the status quo or even eventual statehood and, through economic incentives, ensures that the territories cannot afford a drastic drive for independence. To sever territorial ties with the United States would be, in effect, to cut the territory’s own “economic throat.”

In order to secure its hold on the island, the United States uses a variety of strategies to keep Guam powerless. As discussed earlier, these include the denial of protection under the Constitution, military control that refuses to compromise with the

---

10 Quan, “Respeta I Taotao Tano,” 4.
11 Román, Other American Colonies, 79.
12 Román, Other American Colonies, Fn 54, 74.
13 Román, Other American Colonies, 74.
14 Román, Other American Colonies, 75.
15 Román, Other American Colonies, Fn 70, 78.
16 Román, Other American Colonies, 105.
The Racialization of the People of Guam as Second-Class Citizens

native people, and the denial of self-determination. United States citizenship is also used as a hegemonic incentive. The manipulation of these tools provides the evidence needed to establish the United States as Guam’s colonizers.

Today, Guam is officially recognized as an organized unincorporated territory of the United States. To break down this title, Guam is considered unincorporated because “Guam and its people were not considered an ‘integral part’ of the United States.” It is considered organized because of the passage of the Organic Act of Guam in 1950, which was created in response to the Guamanians repeated concerns of autonomy. The Organic Act accomplished three things: it granted U.S. citizenship to all Guamanians, it created a bill of rights (that was based off of the Constitution), and it established a limited form of local government.

“The people of Guam... are given substantially fewer rights and are viewed as a subordinate group.”

While the Act did finally grant Guamanians with some rights and limited government access, it simultaneously denied them many other rights that are considered basic rights of American citizens, such as voting for President, participating in the national government, and granting representation in Congress. Instead of presenting the Guamanians with the right of self-determination that they desired, they received a formalized document establishing their status as a colony.

The Organic Act is most notable for granting Guamanians United States citizenship. Although U.S. citizenship is highly esteemed, it should not be regarded as a stamp of acceptance from the United States. Guamanians were not granted the full set of rights that would normally be associated with this status. Instead, citizenship becomes a tool that the United States utilizes to sustain control in its colonies while giving the illusion of acceptance.

[T]he label “United States citizen” alone serves a hegemonic function... [and] facilitates colonialism. ...its psychological force is consequential. Accordingly, even if the subordinate and disenfranchised citizen does not share the equal rights, the label alone serves to foster a sense of belonging. Thus, even if the alien-citizen does not enjoy the full complement of rights held by the true Fourteenth-Amendment citizens, because of the imagined quality of the status of citizenship, the alien-citizen will likely still believe he or she belongs.

As a Guamanian, I can personally attest to this feeling of belonging to America because of my United States citizenship. This illusion fades after leaving the island and coming to the mainland because of constant reminders that as Guamanians, we are different because of our homeland, so we are not true Americans. Ignorance plays into many of these interactions because of the vast number of people who have never heard of Guam or who know close to nothing about it. Requiring identification to prove our citizenship, specifically with our passport, is a regular occurrence in any Guamanian’s life in the mainland.

Having established that the United States is indeed applying these tools to keep Guam under its control, it becomes easier to see how Guamanians, despite being American citizens, have been racialized as second-class citizens. The people of Guam have the birthright of United States citizenship, but are given substantially fewer rights and are viewed as a subordinate group. From the perspective of the United States, the racialization of Guamanians equally touches all residents of Guam. This is not the case on the island. Within the local politics of Guam, there exists a tension between Chamorros

17 Quan, “Respeta I Taotao Tano,” 5.
18 Quan, “Respeta I Taotao Tano,” 5.
19 Quan, “Respeta I Taotao Tano,” 5.
20 Román, Other American Colonies, 101.
and other Guamanians. Chamorros and other Guamanians frequently butt heads, as the interests of each group often clash.

In cultural imaginings, the promotors of Independence – perceived as speaking for the “common” person, “the pure and poor” Chamorro – often are believed to have more of a claim to “authenticity” or have more legitimacy in voicing what is “best” for Chamorro culture. …[T]hey are seen as having a “priority on cultural issues rather than economic issues.”

Chamorros are also perceived to have better interests in mind when discussing the future of Guam because of their roots there. Other locals are argued to lack the “authenticity” or, in legal terms, the standing to make such arguments because Guam is not their “true” home.

It is common for all immigrants on Guam to create techniques to validate their experience on Guam and therefore, their opinions. Traditionally, haoles navigate these waters in a racialized manner that insinuates white nationalism. Haoles are critical of Chamorros in many aspects of life such as running the government, raising their children, or managing their health. Often times, these critiques began with phrases like “this island and these people.” However, haoles would still attempt to justify these opinions, in what I would assume to be an unconscious colonial mindset, by “equating belonging with length of stay,” on the island.

Relations between Chamorros and other non-native locals on the island have been debated all throughout the history of Guam. Many arguments center around political power, especially concerning whether or not Chamorros should have special rights set aside for them as natives. This question of special rights is discussed in Anthony Quan’s article “Respeta I Tāotao Tano.” He focuses heavily on Guam’s right to self-determination, but more specifically the Chamorros’ right as the indigenous population of Guam. He argues that Chamorros should be officially established as an indigenous population subject to special protection under the federal government, similar to Native Americans. His argument is that Chamorros have a higher stake in self-determination because their people have been forced to sacrifice more as a consequence of the colonization by the United States.

Quan’s argument for justifying Chamorros as an indigenous people is legitimate and I cannot disagree with him. However, he believes that special rights should be set aside for Chamorros because they are the indigenous people of Guam. He never explicitly details what these rights would entail and it would be interesting to see this proposed list. Coming from the island, it is hard to imagine how this special treatment would play out in local politics. Quan seems genuinely worried for the Chamorro people and the extent of their influence on the island as they become an increasingly smaller proportion of the island. However, in actuality, the results of my survey as well as my own personal experience can attest to the amount of political strength the Chamorro people have on island and the advantage they are granted simply for being “blood” Chamorro.

It is clear that the United States has colonized Guam and proceeds to actively apply measures to maintain complete control. Colonizing Guam and denying its people the same rights as other American citizens has a detrimental effect on Guamanians by classifying them as second-class citizens who are not an integral part of the United States. This racialization occurred in the relationship between Guam and the United States, but has permeated into the local affairs on the island between Chamorros and other Guamanians. The history of the colonization of Guam is evidence that the United States is failing to abide by their anti-colonialism stance and illustrates the various negative consequences that have emerged as a result.

---

22 Monnig, “Proving Chamorro,” 384.
23 Monnig, “Proving Chamorro,” 382.