

I Maga' Håga – Cradle and pillar of life

Tinige' – Kevin Camacho, Esq.

Reflection/Commentary for the U Ma'tuna Si Yu'us

In an article about the Maga Håga, Victoria-Lola Leon Guerrero writes, “Women determined the destiny of their children, and ultimately future generations of CHamoru.”¹ This couldn't be more true today.

Living stateside, it is easy to get distracted by the many issues developing across the country, but I am increasingly aware of what makes its way to the shores of Guahan and the Marianas. With the recent lawsuit backed by the ACLU challenging Guam's abortion statute, restricting telemedicine and the prescription of abortion-inducing drugs, I thought it opportunistic to question and reexamine where we as CHamorus and Guamanians stand in light of this controversial issue.

Guahan faced this issue about thirty years ago. A six-term senator, mother, wife, and community organizer, Elizabeth Perez Arriola was a pioneer and staunch advocate for life. She challenged the progressive culture and popular position that abortion empowers, promotes and advances women dignity. Pro-abortion advocates argue that abortion advances women's position in society, terminating unwanted pregnancies because they are a hindrance, limitation and restriction of a woman's liberty.

Senator Elizabeth Perez Arriola is an example of a modern day Maga' Håga. She fought fiercely against abortion because she believed abortion to be bad for our people. She argued that abortion is not healthcare. As a Christian witness and political leader, she boldly asserted what she and many others believed to be true: abortion causes “irreparable harm (done) to the innocent who is put to death, to parents and the whole of society.”²

The travesty of abortion is that it violates the very sacred recesses of the woman – as one who fosters, nurtures and participates in life itself, the woman is a cradle of life. She nourishes life gestating within her – and in choosing abortion, is the one who decidedly restricts life and terminates it³.

The Maga Håga's role is distinct - she was one who dominated and unified our people. CHamoru women have been pillars of strength and fortitude for society providing much needed wisdom for our people in times of peril. Women held the power, prestige and political influence in pre-colonial society. They were responsible for the transactions of land, the union of clans and family and in the governance of many familial affairs.

When the Spanish arrived, our woman-centric culture clashed with their patriarchal values. With the conversion of our people to Christianity, the CHamoru people over centuries took on a new identity. An inevitable cataclysm of two worlds, of these two cultures, we understand our origins and recognize that CHamoru today are a result of this complex past. Jesuit missionary and martyr Pale San Vitores observed that women were renowned, held in high esteem, dignity and authority.⁴ CHamoru today retain these ancient values, which have been solidified and embedded, woven into the very fabric of CHamoru culture.

¹ <https://www.guampedia.com/chamorro-womens-legacy-of-leadership/>

Author and activist Victoria Leon Guerrero pens a comprehensive synopsis of the role of the Maga' haga through the centuries.

² http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a5.htm

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6207970/>

⁴ <https://www.guampedia.com/womens-roles/>

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Reflection/Commentary for the U Ma'tuna Si Yu'us

Magellan brought more than plague, genocide and a conquest, he brought the *Veritatis Splendor*, which over the years has fused with traditional values to form the basis of fundamental tenets of our cultural values today - rooted in faith and bonded in family, with a patriarchal head, but with a strong, woman-centric core. Ironically, it was the CHamoru woman who was responsible for preserving and protecting our cultural identity over the centuries. Despite the strife and tragedy, CHamoru women kept our culture and language intact, thereby enabling us to retain vestiges of our past amidst turbulent shifts in colonial power. As an amalgam or confluence of pre-contact and post-European realities, the Maga Håga progressed as a heroine figure, a staunch witness of faith, fidelity and cultural fortitude. The pre-Christian value of respect and sanctity of life sacrosanct to the CHamoru people was given a new Christian context - a new dimension. It was arguably fortified anew with a new degree of sacredness. Before, life was sacred because all creation is sacred – but now CHamorus learned that the Christian God became man and took our flesh, and was born of a woman.

Proceeding through the centuries to the present day, we continue to observe that CHamoru are a people of life with profound love and respect for our manamko, our Mañaina and our Famagu'on. In paragraph 35 of the ACLU complaint, there is a statement providing context for a pro-abortion argument stating that there is evidence from the “18th century showing women in Guam and throughout the region have utilized a variety of methods to induce miscarriages or end pregnancies, as well as to use birth control and other methods to control fertility.^{5 6}” This statement attempts to artificially implant a predicate or lay a foundation for the idea that abortive practices were present in pre-colonial CHamoru society, before the arrival of the Europeans. By finding “evidence” about woman practices that induced pregnancy, or attempts to manipulate fertility, the complaint attempts to lay groundwork for the argument of “empowerment,” trying to connect the modern-day feminist position of woman empowerment with pre-colonial CHamoru practices. The problem is it fails to provide support for the overwhelming reality of the cultural norms and values that have developed over our people’s volatile history and are still evident today, though arguably waning. Many of our Micronesian brothers and sisters share these values and identify a “Maga' Håga” role in their respective cultures. Our Palauan brothers and sisters for example, have a similar matriarchal/matrilineal system where women are respected, and power and prestige rest with them.

Abortion is a universal concept that can be found across cultures and societies. The presence of fertility manipulation or practices in pre-contact CHamoru culture does not equate to an argument for a predominant practice, nor does the existence of methods to induce unwanted pregnancies provide a basis or justification for the values for which proponents suggests. A comprehensive journal article surveying the universality of abortion in “non-western” cultures suggests that the primary reasons for developing abortive practices were due to pregnancies that resulted from scandalous affairs, or dealt with other social, cultural and health-related factors.⁷

There is a clear continuity and progression of cultural values which support the position that the CHamoru are a people of life. In our families today, these norms are ever-present and these underlying principles can be traced as far back as to the creation myths that are the earliest

⁵ <https://www.aclu.org/legal-document/complaint-declaratory-and-injunctive-relief-0>

⁶ <https://www.aclu.org/news/reproductive-freedom/abolishing-guams-colonial-past-must-include-protecting-access-to-abortion/>

Dr. Michael Lujan Bevacqua is enlisted as an expert in the ACLU lawsuit arguing a premise for abortion existing since the 18th century.

⁷ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/3519038/>

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Reflection/Commentary for the U Ma'tuna Si Yu'us

accounts for the origin of our people – our origin story. Contrary to what pro-abortion proponents suggest, these origin myths establish foundational and supporting cultural ideology demonstrating a Pro-life position.

Woman as Co-creator, Cradle of life, Fu'una/Fo'na

CHamoru are an interdependent people. We support one another in life's struggles, difficulties and ambitions. This is not a romantic notion of unflinching altruism or idyllic simplemindedness. The values of ina'gof'lie, ina'fa'maolek' inayuda, ina'atan, gef'tao are bedrock cultural principles. As a people who cultivated the land, and the sea, the utility of the other could not be understated or undervalued. Our gaze was always towards the heavens and the horizon, our perspective was always towards celestial realities, navigating the stars in communion with all of creation. Even our dead were spiritually present, demonstrated by our deep veneration for their remains, skulls for example, were interred at the family home, relics preserved for generations to come demonstrating a pervading and continuing presence within our family⁸.

The earliest accounts of creation in our CHamoru oral tradition tell of Fu'una yan Puntan. The Spanish missionaries documented this creation story. In their account, the underlying value is this: the woman is the impetus of the creative force - She is a life-giver, not a life-taker. It is embedded in our psychology, the very essence of the female characteristic is that of one who nourishes, creates, sustains, and "gives life."

To suggest that CHamoru women engaged in pregnancy-inducing, abortive practices as normative behavior and justification for the current pro-abortion position is not supported by the ideology present in our origin stories and in the image of Fu'una as the co-creator of humanity. It is a break from the values that our "origin story" seeks to communicate - that the woman is seen as the *Kuna*, the cradle, from which all life and where all life begins. She is Ipso facto, the precursor of the human person, of human society, as life-builder, she is our beginning.⁹ The Woman is *Laso Fu'a*, or *Lasu Fua*, the Woman is Fu'a rock. The Cradle of all creation begins in the womb of the woman. The Maga' Håga does not take life from the cradle, she protects and nourishes life!¹⁰

Dr. Katherine Aguon in her explanation of the inafamå'lek as one of the founding cultural values of the CHamoru lists "patgon" as one that explained the role of society regarding children. She says, "children are valued – and it is everyone's responsibility in raising them."¹¹

Poksai¹²-

Mamomoksai i famagu'on. The issue of abortion is complex because it involves the values of autonomy, personal liberty, sexuality, marriage and religion. These are hot topic items because they strike to the core of our identity as a people and involve areas of life that we all regard as personal, inviolable and protected. If our understanding of abortion is therefore viewed in light of faith or religious convictions, laws and our own sense of morality, it becomes clear as to why we are at odds with one another. Culture is dynamic, and constantly changing, but the question for those who want to know what the CHamoru position is on the matter must begin by addressing whether "antigo"

⁸ <https://www.guampedia.com/ancient-chamorros-use-of-human-bones/>

⁹ <https://www.guampedia.com/fuuna/>

¹⁰ <https://www.guampedia.com/fouha-bay-cradle-of-creation/>

¹¹ <https://www.guampedia.com/inafamaolek/>

¹² <https://www.guampedia.com/poksai/>

I Maga' Håga – Cradle and pillar of life

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Reflection/Commentary for the U Ma'tuna Si Yu'us

CHamoru cultural values support a pro-life or pro-choice position, and the answer is not what proponents are suggesting.

You can ask from among family members, or friends, when it involves children, the concept of Poksai runs deep. In Guåhan, families raise children. The village raises children; nana, tata, auntie, uncle, godmother, sister, we all raise our children – Manhita. It is not uncommon because we are a society deeply involved with one another.

Anyone who has had a child out of wedlock; anyone who has had a child while still in high school, or anyone who has been a single mother can attest - we provide support, filled with love and concern for each other. It is not easy. It is very difficult; however, like all struggles we face, we do not confront them alone – but together. It is a part of the fabric of CHamoru culture - no child is left wanting. I speak generally, because as we grow and change over time, we observe a deterioration of even these sacred family values. Over the past several hundred years, the poksai i patgon is a concept deeply CHamoru. Some have even called it “nina'na.”¹³

Pulan i patgon

If mom or dad is working, we help watch one another's children. We value our family and want to help. Our CHamoru culture protects, provides and nurtures our children. This is still true today. You can go to nana's house and say, “I'll be back in a few,” or we can all gather at nanan biha's house on Sunday after church to grab a meal, share an afternoon and build our family bonds, making memories that are passed on for generations and cherished forever. To be truly CHamoru, is to be pro-life. Many of us have been reared, raised and brought up by our grandparents, aunts, cousins, or extended family. CHamoru culture has unequivocally chosen the path of life over death. It is embedded in our core values of Poksai, Pulan and Patgon still present today in our homes and in our hearts.

Abortion targets the CHamoru baby

If you advocate for the preservation of CHamoru language, culture and our environment, you must first examine the need to fight to preserve, protect and defend the CHamoru person, beginning in the womb of his/her mother. An article in the Guam Post in 2016 provided data that state “61 percent, of abortions were performed on women identifying their ethnicity as CHamoru.”¹⁴ This statistic is startling. Advocating abortion is akin to participating in a “cultural infanticide” - the systematic desecration, the decimation of the CHamoru person from the most sacred of spaces – his/her mother's womb. Unrestricted access to abortion directly imperils the future generation of CHamorus because it targets the CHamoru baby. This is not what our Saina have taught us.

My late Aunt Bernadita Camacho Dungca, another Maga Håga wrote the Inifresi.¹⁵ Recited by our children in our schools and in government ceremonies with pride, reverence and unwavering spiritual fervor, it is an offering of oneself declaring a pledge made with full consciousness of heart, mind, soul, body and spirit. This encompasses the CHamoru mission: to protect, defend, all that God has given us – the earth, the sea, the sky, and our people. If water is life, and the land is sacred, what more value can be given to the life from within the Maga Håga? It is the most sacred of all.

¹³ <https://www.guampedia.com/ninana/>

¹⁴ https://www.postguam.com/news/local/report-chamorro-women-account-for-61-percent-of-abortions-on-guam/article_a67e820c-11df-11e6-b263-dbb071142e26.html

¹⁵ <https://www.guampedia.com/guam-pledge-chamorro-inifresi/>

I Maga' Håga – Cradle and pillar of life

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Reflection/Commentary for the U Ma'tuna Si Yu'us

The image of Hurao should stir us, to inspire us to seek liberation from a poisonous mentality that seeks to subjugate and mislead our people, blurring and twisting the idea of women autonomy, sexuality, and freedom. *We are stronger than we think!* We can quickly free ourselves from the foreign mentality that seeks to persuade us that an unwanted pregnancy restricts freedom rather than promotes it. Let us not undervalue the gift of a child, and the miracle of human life itself! This toxic mentality seeks to perpetuate a throw-away culture, a culture of convenience, dehumanizing what was once regarded as sacred, and reducing a child in utero to a mere human appendage. Even in the face of unwanted pregnancy, or the horror of sexual assault, there is hope, and there is healing. Life is greater than death – in value, and in purpose. We know this well in our community. Many of us have sisters, cousins, and daughters who have had children out of wedlock, or who have conceived as a result of rape. This is not to underemphasize the trauma or pain they may have experienced, but rather boldly state that even in these most difficult of circumstances, we see the miracle of life take shape and emerge victorious even in the face of such tragedy and atrocity.

When we look into the eyes of our Manamko', let us ask for their wisdom, that we may retain the treasures and knowledge of our past and carry it forward to the next generation. When we look into the eyes of our Famagu'on, let us rediscover the awe and innocence of life and its fragility, recognizing life as a true gift. When we look into the eyes of our Mañelu, let us seek to uplift, support, and encourage one another. Let us never forget the human dignity that binds us all - our universal fraternity, boldly proclaimed by the likes of Dr. Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and our forebears.

The Maga Håga of old determined the destiny of the CHamoru child, and this is still true today. She must fight with a renewed sense of urgency today to ensure that the CHamoru of tomorrow will never forget who we are and where we came from. With her, let us fearlessly and boldly protect the gift of life which is the most sacred of all gifts from our Creator.

The Maga' Håga today - CHamoru and Guamanians united

Guam legend tells of when a giant fish encroached and threatened the island, endangering the people, eating away at our island's core. This striking image can be a metaphor for what assails our people today. It was the ingenuity, brilliance, and shrewdness of the CHamoru women that saved our people. We have had many examples of Maga Håga over the past century, many women who exemplified these values and ideals as protectress, leader, and nurturer. Many are scholars, educators, politicians, and professional women. They are mothers, and wives who have contributed to the growth and flourishing of our people through world-wars, political strife and global unrest. They can be described by all accounts as being successful in the modern sense and yet guardians of the "antigo" values of our past. Their example directly conflicts with what proponents for abortion argue – you cannot be successful or achieve your full potential without your unabridged right to abortion, because having an unwanted child impedes upward mobility and hampers worldly success.

If you want to identify a colonial mentality or ideology that endangers true CHamoru values, it is this western notion that abortion liberates, enables and emboldens women to achieve without limit. We need the *Fuetsan Fama'lao'an*, the triumph of the Maga Håga today, because the plague of abortion seeks to strip her of her identity and unique dignity. What makes her truly noble and essential for us all is the unassignable privilege of bringing life into the world. Being a mother and raising children is in fact the crowning achievement of a woman – and it does not take away from her ability to succeed in other realms of society, as evident in this short list of extraordinary women, whose lives exemplify this. They include figures such as Agueda Johnston, Elizabeth Perez Arriola, Cecilia Cruz Bamba, Cloutide Castro Gould, Dr. Carmen Kasperbauer, Lourdes Camacho, Gloria Nelson, Madeline Bordallo, and Pilar Lujan, just to name a few.

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Reflection/Commentary for the U Ma'tuna Si Yu'us

The wives of the governors of Guam have been known as the Maga Håga. All of our nanas, aunts, and mothers can be listed here in a way. Even Madeline Bordallo, born in Graceville MN, former eight-term congresswoman, espoused this position. Advocating for pro-life policy not only as a Christian woman, but as a CHamoru by marriage to former Governor Ricardo Bordallo, she was our Maga Håga and had our people's interests at heart. Choosing life exemplifies personal responsibility, courage, and integrity. I Man Maga Håga siha possess all of these. Abortion does not restrict a woman to reach her full potential. These women lead with grace and by example, and commanded utmost respect. They represent who and what the Maga Håga is.

The Fate of our people

Right now is an historic time. In the legislaturan Guahan, we have a majority of female leaders, Maga Håga who today are confronted with the task of both protecting and preserving our people and our culture. I urge you, Famalao'an Guahan, Fanmakmata!

Protehi ham, Sostiene ham. Na' Manmatakna hamyo. Do not yield to pressures and this false sense of liberation. We build upon the foundation of our forebears, the Maga Håga who have come and gone. Let their efforts not be in vain – let their example inspire and embolden you to protect our people, our culture and life, most precious in the womb – in the Laso Fu'a.