

Occupied Oceans, Submerged Sovereignty: Marine Conservation and Chamorro Dispossession
in the Northern Mariana Islands

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Abstract

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This thesis examines equity and environmental justice in ocean governance in the Northern Mariana Islands through the perspectives of Indigenous Chamorro professionals working in coastal management. The research reveals how western approaches to conservation have disenfranchised Chamorros and undermined self-determination efforts over traditional lands and waters. Interviews with Chamorro participants highlight concerns over marginalization in equity initiatives, the challenges of addressing systemic inequalities within a colonial context, and the importance of centering Indigenous voices. By foregrounding Chamorro experiences, knowledges, and aspirations, this thesis highlights the need for a decolonial approach to environmental management in the Marianas that is grounded in Chamorro cultural values like inafa'maolek. Achieving equity requires dismantling prevailing power dynamics and co-creating solutions with Chamorros that honor the inherent rights and responsibilities to ancestral territory.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1.	Introduction.....	5
Chapter 2.	Inafa’maolek and Settler-Colonial Disruptions	8
Chapter 3.	Nested Sovereignties and Chamorro Collective Continuance	11
Chapter 4.	Contemporary Marine Conservation in the Northern Mariana Islands	19
Chapter 5.	Methodology	20
Chapter 6.	Findings and Discussion	22
Chapter 7.	EEJ: Where Do We Go From Here?.....	25
7.1	Indigenous Resurgence	25
7.2	Grounded in inafa’maolek.....	26
	Community Engagement and Collaboration.....	26
	Cultural Sensitivity Training.....	26
	Holistic and Ecosystem-based Management	27
	Adaptive Management	27
	Protection and Restoration of Cultural Sites.....	27
	Recognition of Indigenous Rights	27
Conclusion		28

Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

I cannot remember ever hearing the words sovereignty or self-determination growing up. Neither was Indigenous a part of my vocabulary until well into my early 20's, when I took my first Pacific Islander Studies class at Arizona State University. I proudly and passionately claim my indigeneity today, but I am still settling with the fact that I will always mourn that part of my identity that, for many complex and multifaceted reasons, was withheld from me for so many years. I am also increasingly aware of the ways in which my life experiences, both at home and in the diaspora, are informed by the Indigenous struggle and impacted by settler-colonialism.

To begin, I am half-Chamorro of Northern Marianas Descent and half-white, or American, as we still say in the Marianas. My dad was 16 when he and his siblings were sent to the states for school. A few years later he met and married my mom and when I was 2 months old, we made the move back to Saipan. My (re)introduction to the diaspora at 16 years old closely resembles that of my dad's experience, except I made it back to the Marianas much earlier than he did. Part of my personal process of healing from colonization involves understanding the very real ways in which settler-colonialism has impacted and contextualized my relationships with family. For example, the knowledge and memories I have of my paternal grandparents. My Nang (grandma) Piding's mom, Nan Celia, died during the war on Saipan. During the month-long battle between Japanese and American soldiers, many Chamorro families on Saipan hid in the caves up north for safety and to avoid being placed in the internment camp.

At some point, Nan Celia ventured out of the cave to find water and was hit by a bomb. Consequently, when the war ended, my nang and her two younger sisters were separated and sent to live with other families, as was the custom at the time. The family that took in my nang lived in Chalan Kanoa, the village in which my grandparents would go on to build our ancestral home – a tiny two-bedroom with customary outdoor kitchen and no running water, across the street from a triangular prism-shaped bomb shelter and where they would eventually raise their 12 children. Both of my grandparents, whose childhoods were characterized by war and instability, were forced to adapt to the forces of change under Japanese and US imperialism. The prohibition of *fino*’ Chamorro (Chamorro language) under Japanese administration and political instability during the Trust Territory transition forced Chamorros to adopt new languages and systems of governance to survive. These are examples of collective capacities that facilitate Chamorro resilience.

This paper contributes to discussions surrounding equity in ocean governance by contextualizing federal environmental authority and marine conservation in the Northern Mariana Islands (NMI) as an extension of settler-militarization in the Pacific. This project centers Indigenous Chamorros from the NMI working in coastal management, a space primarily dominated by Western approaches to conservation and non-Indigenous expertise, and the implications for equity and environmental justice (EEJ) and Chamorro self-determination. Local government agencies in the Marianas primarily depend on external funding from the federal government to operate, which has led to a significant degree of paranoia that to voice concerns about US paramountcy in the Pacific risks negatively impacting their abilities to operate. However, ocean equity investment requires these critiques. It also requires critical reflection of EEJ objectives that are designed and implemented by federal agencies and mainstream

environmental organizations, often without meaningful power-sharing or co-creation with Indigenous groups. These top-down approaches are inconsistent with the goals of equity and justice and consequently exploit Chamorro notions of *inafa'maolek*, a cultural framework of care and responsibility, that grounds the work being done by Chamorros in the coastal management sector. To address the shortcomings of these solutions, such efforts need to expand beyond inclusivity (Temin, 2018) and participation to include intentional acts to rectify injustices done to Indigenous Ocean people as a result of settler-colonial domination.

Excerpts from our interviews reveal the participants' critical perspectives on EEJ initiatives, their concerns about tokenism, and the challenges of working in a colonial and militarized context. The themes identified highlight the importance of addressing the underlying power dynamics, systemic inequalities, and historical legacies that shape contemporary coastal management efforts in the NMI. By centering the voices and lived experiences of Indigenous Chamorros, I hope to reveal a more equity-oriented understanding of the effects of settler colonialism on contemporary coastal management and the implications for ocean equity.

Chapter 1 reviews key theoretical concepts and frameworks that are useful for understanding how the Chamorro peoples' relation with the land and sea and the management of coastal resources has evolved over time in response to deepening colonial entanglement. Chapter 2 expands on the concept of collective continuance as an amalgamation of adaptive capacities emerging from the NMI and Guam as a mechanism for exercising Chamorro environmental sovereignty. Chapter 2 continues by describing the tensions between the nested sovereignties of the US and the NMI. Nested sovereignties is one in which Indigenous sovereignty is always contained and defined within settler sovereignty (Simpson, 2016) (Arvin, 2015). Chapter 3 describes the state of contemporary marine conservation efforts in the CNMI. Chapter 4 reviews

relevant literature including topics such as decolonization, Indigenous environmental sovereignty, and critical race theory (CRT). Chapter 5 describes the research methodology and approach to analysis. Chapter 6 expands upon the themes introduced in Chapter 5 and continues with a discussion on the research findings. In Chapter 7, I dive deeper into the concepts of equity and environmental justice, orienting the discussion towards a future wherein marine conservation and ocean governance are grounded in Chamorro sovereignty.

Chapter 2. INAFA 'MAOLEK AND SETTLER-COLONIAL DISRUPTIONS

The Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), an archipelago of 14 islands located in the western Pacific Ocean, possesses a unique environmental and cultural landscape that has been shaped by both its Indigenous heritage and the impacts of settler colonialism and militarization. The islands are home to a rich tapestry of ecosystems, including coral reefs, seagrass beds, and mangroves, which support a diverse array of life and provide life-giving resources for the Indigenous Chamorros.

For centuries after the ancient seafaring Chamorros first settled in the Marianas Archipelago they lived a self-sufficient life of subsistence fishing and agriculture. Their settlements dotted the coastline, where they built their homes atop megalithic structures called *latte* carved from limestone, basalt, and coral. Society was divided into three castes - the *Manachang* class, the *Acha'ot* class, and the *Matua* class. Instead of a centralized government, politics were generally handled at the village and clan levels. The *Matua* controlled the largest amount of land and coastal resources, mediated a vast network of intra- and inter-island

exchange, managed communal fisheries, and as high-ranking leaders, acted as liaisons to visiting foreign ships.

Settler-colonial narratives painted the Ancient Chamorros as uncivilized and disorganized thieves. This rejects the reality of an established system of governance and resource management grounded in notions of *inafa'maolek* and Indigeneity. These biased portrayals served to undermine and marginalize traditional knowledge, values, and practices, perpetuating colonial power dynamics and epistemic violence that refused to recognize the deep connections between Indigenous Chamorros and their environment. As Kanaka Maoli scholar Maile Arvin describes, Indigeneity is the condition of being genealogically related to a place, wherein that place is understood to be an ancestor whose wellbeing is the responsibility of the people (Arvin, 2015). Settler colonialism disrupts the abilities of Indigenous peoples to fulfill these responsibilities.

Historically, the CNMI has experienced multiple waves of colonization, beginning with the Spanish in the 16th century, followed by the Germans, Japanese, and eventually the United States after World War II. Each of these colonial powers has left its mark on the region's environment, communities, and governance structures. In 1668, over 100 years after Ferdinand Magellan first visited the Marianas, the islands were officially colonized when Spanish authorities established a mission and seminary on Guam. They also renamed the archipelago *Islas de Marianas* to honor the Queen of Spain who funded the mission. Many Chamorros resisted the conversion efforts, which led to nearly three decades of active conflict known as the "Spanish-Chamorro Wars" (1668-1695). By the end of the war, Christian conversion, military conquest, and foreign disease led to massive Chamorro depopulation. The surviving population were forcefully removed from their settlements across the archipelago and relocated to just a

handful of villages on Guam and Rota. This period of colonization and conversion under Spain continued for two more centuries.

The imposition of foreign values and priorities has resulted in the marginalization and displacement of Indigenous populations, as well as the degradation of natural resources and traditional land management practices. Militarization has further exacerbated these issues, with the islands being utilized for military training and operations, leading to environmental damage and restricted access to ancestral lands (Camacho, 2011). These ongoing processes have disrupted the traditional social and ecological systems that underpin the native cultures of the CNMI, creating tensions between the desire for self-determination and the political and economic realities of U.S. unincorporated territory status. Inafa'maolek serves as the ontological foundation for Chamorro self-determination that facilitates our collective capacity to adapt to settler-colonial forces of change.

The concept of inafa'maolek literally means to “make good/or better (for one another)” and constitutes one of the most critical components of Chamorro ontology. Like other similar traditional notions of care, including but not limited to chenchule' (obligation) and respetu (respect), inafa'maolek also implies a mutual relationship between human and non-human kin, medicinal plants, and ancestral spirits, as well as others, predicated on interdependence, reciprocity, and kinship. As Chamorro scholar Tiara Naputi explains, “inafa'maolek is more than just a value, it is an entire cultural framework” (Na'puti, Archipelagic rhetoric: remapping the Marianas and challenging militarization from "A Stirring Place", 2019). It constitutes a set of traditional ethical protocols and embodied practices for accordingly promoting, protecting, and restoring the wellbeing, health, integrity, and prosperity of those with which you hold relations. Though “pre-contact” forms of inafa'maolek have certainly shifted and evolved after hundreds of

years of colonial entanglement, the underlying practice of making good and making better for one another persists.

Anthropologist and Osage scholar, Jean Dennison, describes entanglement as “marking points of intersection and interconnection” and this is a helpful lens for which to view Indigenous persistence and continuance that “marks the shifts created through unequal power dynamics without erasing the agency possible within them” (Dennison, 2017). In other words, entanglement stipulates the realities of Indigenous - settler coexistence in a way that creates space to resist and defy settler authority without diminishing the value of Indigenous historical action (or inaction). Entanglement also gives credence to Indigenous ontological persistence, i.e. *inafa'maolek*, as an act of Chamorro environmental sovereignty. In this context, the establishment of the CNMI's coastal management program in 1983 to administer the Coastal Zone Management Act is an example of Chamorro sovereignty that further entangled them with U.S. federal authority. Nowhere are these entangled sovereignties more acutely navigated than in the CNMI's intergovernmental sector of natural resource management.

Chapter 3. NESTED SOVEREIGNTIES AND CHAMORRO COLLECTIVE CONTINUANCE

The intergenerational impacts of settler-colonialism permeate throughout the Northern Mariana Islands in deeply personal and systemic ways that are similar to those of our kin on Guam. However, key differences in our political relationship with the US as well as inter-island conflicts surrounding inclusivity and contemporary Chamorro identity continue to prevent the Northern Marianas from aligning ourselves within Guam's sovereignty movement. Additionally,

most of the research on settler-militarization in the Marianas is primarily focused on Guam or produced by Guam-based scholars. Settler-militarization is a term coined to describe the reiteration of settler-colonial pursuits under the guise of national security (Na'puti, 2022). The result of this work being largely undertaken by Guam-based scholars and with a Guam focus is a homogenous collection of scholarly work that cannot be applied to the Northern Marianas. In saying this I do not intend to diminish Guam's Indigenous Chamorro scholars or their work. On the contrary, the contributions of scholars and activists like Craig Perez, Tiara Na'puti, Michael Lujan Bevacqua, Ken Camacho, and countless others, are critical to the collective continuance of the Chamorro people.

To explain further I will use an analogy inspired by the latte, a building support comprised of two solid stone carvings, a *haligi* (pillar) and *tasa* (capstone) upon which the ancient Chamorro's built their homes and other structures until the arrival of Spanish colonizers caused them to abandon this 500 year-long practice. The latte represents our collective continuance, an amalgamation of all our collective capacities to exercise self-determination in ways that maintain Chamorro cultural integrity, health, economic vitality, and political order (Whyte, 2017). Collective capacities are supported by human institutions and relationships between human and non-human kin, medicinal plants, spiritual lands, etc., based on principles of trust and responsibility. We can view the *haligi* as representative of collective capacities emerging from Guam, such as the anti-settler-militarization protests at Litekyan and fino' Chamorro revitalization, as well as the multitude of research and academic literature by Guam-based scholars. A high degree of collective continuance consists of many specific and overlapping capacities that work collectively to increase our overall ability to adapt to forces of change and exercise Chamorro self-determination. The second, but equally important,

component of the latte is the *tasa*, which represents the collective capacities emerging from the Northern Mariana Islands.

As mentioned earlier, there are several differences between the Northern Marianas and Guam that over time inform how, when, and for what we exercise Chamorro self-determination. I will focus primarily on collective capacities related to ocean governance and limit the examples I use to the post-WW2 era, which encompasses the official start of US colonial authority, the signing of the Covenant to create the Commonwealth, and the current administration of federal ocean policies.

In 1898, when they lost the Spanish-American War, Spain sold the 14 northern Mariana Islands to Germany and Guam became a US territory along with other former Spanish colonies Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Cuba. The US' collection of all these new territories created a lot of controversy over whether they should be incorporated into the nation and if constitutional rights would apply to those who lived there. These questions were taken up by a series of landmark Supreme court cases between 1901-1922, now known as the Insular Cases, which established plenary power of Congress over all new territories and their people. This is also where we got the new political category of "unincorporated territory".

In 1914, after the start of World War I, Japan seized the Northern Mariana Islands from Germany. The impact of German colonization in the northern Marianas is often overlooked but is actually very important in the context of land use and resource management. Germany wanted to invest in copra production, and encouraged Chamorros from Guam to return by giving them land ownership rights to manage copra farms. In the German era, the NMI's population went from under 2000 to over 3000, mostly on Saipan which at 40 square miles was the largest island after Guam.

Saipan became the center of Japanese occupation. Japan did away with the land ownership system, relocated people to just two main villages, and the newest wave of acculturation and conversion began. Saipan went through its most rapid development period to date, all due to the success of the sugar cane industry. They established schools, a hospital, but they also banned the Chamorro language and forced people to work on sugar cane plantations for little to no pay. By the start of WW2, the Japanese population in the northern Marianas was roughly 30,000, around 70% of whom were Okinawan migrant workers and their families brought by the government to work on the sugar cane farms.

In 1947, the United Nations Security Council and US violated the sovereignty of the Chamorro people again when the US was given oversight authority as “Trustee” of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI), tasked with promoting the “development of the inhabitants of the trust territory toward self-government” (UN Trusteeship Council S/RES/21, 1947). Later, in 1966, the six administrative districts under the TTPI petitioned to form a joint commission on their political futures. This would result in the creation of the Covenant to Establish a Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands in Political Union with the United States of America (Covenant). Dian Million talks about Western progress and the religiosity of “development” as an ontological indicator of settler-colonialism (2018). It is reasonable to assume that neither sovereignty nor self-determination ever existed in America’s vision for the Northern Marianas. The UN resolution document gives more evidence for this when the TTPI is referenced as “Trusteeship of Strategic Areas”.

During a time of great vulnerability and fear for the future, the Chamorro people chose to exercise their sovereignty not by choosing independence like the other districts would, but in agreeing to become a territory with the stipulation that the Covenant be created. The Covenant,

although rooted in the settler-colonial system of politics, legally safeguarded Chamorro land rights in the Northern Marianas, an option that was not afforded to Guam when it was made a territory.

In “Indigenous Resurgence and Co-Resistance”, Leanne Simpson discusses the experience of historical injustice impacting how we respond to injustice today and the implications of seeking settler-colonial recognition. These critiques of recognition are certainly warranted, but it also creates an opportunity to contextualize the situation surrounding the signing of the Covenant. If the goal is decolonizing the Marianas through Chamorro collective continuance, then one objective should be to define the scope of equity and environmental justice from the perspective of NMI Chamorros. In an equity-oriented context, we can theorize several possibilities that challenge the narrative that the NMI simply signed away their legal rights to sovereignty. I argue that this, too, is an instance where we see the value of inafa’maolek come into play. Perhaps they felt a sense of obligation to the US for liberating them from Japan. At the same time, they may have seen this as an opportunity to set a precedent for their relationship with the US government that leaves room for future exercises of self-determination. Recontextualizing this event opposes settler-colonial narratives of Indigenous peoples as weak and in need of oversight and instead offers a new perspective wherein the NMI used its collective capacity to challenge US paramountcy claims over Indigenous Chamorro territory.

Since then, the Covenant has been used on multiple occasions by the NMI to exercise Chamorro self-determination, especially as it relates to jurisdictional disputes over coastal waters and resources. In a 2005 Supreme Court case, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) sued the US over ownership of submerged lands off the CNMI coast. The CNMI Constitution, preempted by the Covenant, provides that submerged lands off the coast of the

Commonwealth to which the CNMI has a claim of ownership under US law, are public lands and belong collectively to the people of the Commonwealth who are of Northern Marianas descent. The US also makes claim to submerged lands for reasons related to defense and foreign affairs. CNMI officials suggested that the CNMI might have permanent jurisdiction over offshore submerged lands without regard to whether Congress has transferred title to those lands. The CNMI filed two actions under the Quiet Title Act (QTA), claiming exclusive jurisdiction over submerged lands and marine resources from the low-water mark of its coastline to a seaward distance of two hundred nautical miles. The district court dismissed the CNMI's claim of title to the offshore submerged lands, ruling that the US possesses paramount rights over the waters extending seaward of the ordinary low-water mark and over the lands, minerals, and other things of value underlying such waters, and that the United States acquired paramount authority over the submerged lands lying seaward of the CNMI's coastline as an incident of the United States' acquisition of external sovereignty under Article I of the Covenant.

The court of appeals ruled that the United States has acquired and retained authority over these lands, and that federal law preempts the CNMI's jurisdictional claims over them. Their ruling also states that the CNMI had no rights in offshore submerged lands unless and until the United States transferred such lands to the CNMI. The CNMI argued that the Covenant between the United States and the CNMI conveyed oceanic submerged lands to the CNMI, but the court of appeals found that the Covenant was insufficient to divest the United States of title to the submerged lands. The CNMI also argued that the lower courts erred by failing to construe the Covenant under principles applicable to Indian treaties, but the court of appeals found that this was not relevant to the case. The Supreme Court decided that there was no reason for further review of the case.

In response to the CNMI's argument that the Covenant be construed in a manner not unlike Indian treaties, Solicitor General, Paul D. Clement, provided a lengthy opinion in his brief of opposition.

"The United States did not "conquer" the people of the NMI. After the defeat of Japan, the United Nations designated the United States to be the administering authority of the Trust Territory. That process culminated in the Covenant, which was "a sovereign act of self-determination" by the people of the NMI. The people of the NMI freely determined that their future relationship with the United States would involve a commonwealth form of government under which all aspects of external sovereignty would be ceded to the United States. The NMI could have chosen a different political relationship with the United States, such as "free association," which other Trust Territory districts adopted. Under that form of association, the NMI would have obtained rights to offshore submerged lands, but at the price of losing advantages of coming under the external sovereignty of the United States. As the court of appeals recognized, the "trust principles" that the CNMI urges have no application in this context."

This specific attempt by the CNMI government at legal recognition of Indigenous Chamorro oceanic spaces failed. Dana Powell, citing Audra Simpson (2014), discusses a similar situation of tensions between the "nested sovereignties" of the Navajo Nation and the US over energy development (2018). She goes on to explain the colonization of territories for national power and urban development as characteristic of the contemporary colonial situation. This is particularly helpful as it reminds us that the NMI's failing within the context of a settler-colonial institution does not negate the value of the Covenant as an important tool for mobilization. If anything, it acts as further proof that Chamorro leaders used their capacity within the Trusteeship to create the Covenant intentionally and with the anticipation that it would be used in future exercises of Chamorro self-determination.

The signing of the Covenant established a precedent of using legal mechanisms within the settler-colonial system to exercise self-determination, as demonstrated again in 2008. Faced with economic hardship and criticism of its immigration system, the CNMI legislature took

measures to address issues of labor abuse and human trafficking through amendments to local laws, including passing the Commonwealth Employment Act of 2007 which required employers to get prior approval of employment contracts by CNMI Department of Licensing and also pay to repatriate workers once their contracts were terminated. However, US Congress chose to pass the Consolidated Natural Resources Act, using the guise of the CNMI's inability to enforce these laws as justification to federalize immigration control. While the CNMI had taken steps to remedy issues in its system, the US disregarded these efforts in order to exert control over migration into US territory.

Then-Governor Ben Fitial subsequently filed a lawsuit claiming the US was in violation of the Covenant agreement. Fitial's failed lawsuit highlights an attempt by the CNMI to challenge US authority and push back against the narrative that they lacked the capacity for self-governance. Like the "submerged lands" case, the US refused to recognize the CNMI's right to exercise control over its own territory as established by the Covenant. The federal government's actions appear to stem from a desire to limit the CNMI's autonomy and reassert US dominion rather than a genuine concern for the welfare of migrants. By framing the situation in this way, we can understand the CNMI's response as an assertion of their inherent rights to self-determination guaranteed by the Covenant, not simply a reaction to US policy changes. The Covenant has proven instrumental for the NMI Chamorros in navigating the settler-colonial system and shaping their political relationship with the US on their own terms.

CHAPTER 4. CONTEMPORARY MARINE CONSERVATION IN THE NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS

As the NMI transitioned from a UN Trust Territory to a US commonwealth and unincorporated territory in the 1970s, marine conservation efforts began to fall under the authority of the US federal government. This meant that the CNMI would be subjected to US federal laws and policies around coastal management and marine protected areas, which over the years has had significant implications for the Chamorro people. For example, Chamorro fishing rights and access to traditional marine spaces became increasingly more restricted by federal regulations. Federal agencies like NOAA became responsible for designating and managing marine protected areas in CNMI waters. Locals had limited say in these decisions or the ability to shape policies to fit their cultural and economic needs. Conservation models were largely imported from the US mainland without consideration for the unique Indigenous context of the CNMI. Chamorro ecological knowledge and management practices were sidelined in favor of a US approach. There was a failure to reconcile marine conservation goals with indigenous rights to resources and cultural heritage as recognized by international law. Federal authority over ocean space led to further militarization of CNMI lands and waters for strategic defense areas, radically restricting access for Chamorros and damaging the environment.

With local capacity lacking, economic opportunities in the marine conservation sector went primarily to non-indigenous groups from the US. The influx of federal funding for marine conservation and coastal management in CNMI has largely benefitted non-Indigenous groups over Chamorros. While policies aim to build local capacity and empower underserved communities, a significant portion of resources and positions still go to outside organizations and individuals to carry out work in CNMI waters and communities. Despite the stated goals of non-

Chamorro run organizations of collaborating with local stakeholders, Chamorros remain in a subordinate role, relying on outside groups to direct conservation efforts in their own homeland. This model further embeds a power imbalance wherein Chamorros must work through settler institutions to access resources and shape policy for their own territory.

While increased federal investment in CNMI's environment and communities is greatly needed, the funds are not being distributed or managed in a way that meaningfully supports Chamorro self-determination over their lands and waters. The failure to prioritize Chamorro-led organizations and build capacity from within continues the trend of sidelining Indigenous knowledge and governance in favor of a US-centric approach. Until Chamorros are given more direct control and authority over conservation funding and policy in CNMI, environmental efforts will remain disconnected from the cultural context and priorities of the native population. The current state of marine conservation risks becoming another means of asserting US power over Chamorro territory if changes are not made to redistribute resources and reframe management strategies.

CHAPTER 5. METHODOLOGY

For this research, I conducted interviews with coastal managers and conservation practitioners in the CNMI. The participants in the study consisted of two men and two women, all of whom are Indigenous Chamorros between the ages of 30-40. They all hold a post-secondary degree in marine conservation or a related field, with three participants having master's degrees and one participant holding a bachelor's degree. All the participants have worked in the government sector at various natural resource management agencies for the duration of their professional careers. Two participants, RC and KR, are currently employed at separate local government

agencies, one participant, DB, previously worked at a local government agency but is currently employed at an environmental non-profit, and one participant, JY, is currently working for the federal government.

To facilitate the interviews, I used videoconferencing through Zoom. The interviews had a duration ranging from 1.15 hours to two hours. The questions asked during the interviews covered a range of topics, including general demographic information, years of experience in marine conservation or related fields, motivations for their work, views on the current state of marine conservation in the CNMI, perspectives on federal environmental authority, and experiences with and opinions on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and environmental justice (EEJ) initiatives in their professional work. Additionally, participants were asked to provide recommendations for making conservation and ocean governance more equitable and just.

While in-person interviews are more common in qualitative research, video-conference interviews have been shown to yield comparable data. Moreover, external barriers such as the COVID-19 pandemic have made in-person meetings more challenging, making video-conferencing a practical and effective method of data collection. In this particular study, as all respondents reside in the CNMI, video-conference interviews were an appropriate means of contact.

All interviews were recorded through Zoom, and the recordings were later transcribed using the editing software Descript. The data obtained from the interviews were then analyzed using an inductive approach to identify themes related to equity and environmental justice. This process of inductive coding allowed for the identification and further development of initial

themes regarding participants' perceptions of federal environmental authority and the connections between colonization, imperialism, and contemporary marine conservation efforts.

CHAPTER 6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Excerpts from these interviews reveal the participants' critical perspectives on DEI initiatives, their concerns about tokenism, and the challenges of working in a colonial and militarized context. The themes identified highlight the importance of addressing the underlying power dynamics, systemic inequalities, and historical legacies that shape contemporary marine conservation efforts in the NMI.

Key themes:

Critique of DEI initiatives

The participants suggest that DEI initiatives often fail to address the underlying white supremacist, colonial, and imperial systems that shape the context of their work. Instead, these initiatives can serve to tokenize and co-opt individuals from marginalized backgrounds.

"DEI initiatives really just include us into these systems that are already white supremacist and colonial at their core – and imperial at their core, because militarization goes hand in hand with it."

DEI and EEJ policies are often designed and implemented by federal agencies and mainstream environmental groups without meaningful power-sharing or co-creation with Indigenous groups. This top-down approach is inconsistent with the goals of equity and justice. Real power sharing would require these groups giving up substantial control and authority. Promoting local participation and capacity building are important but do not go far enough to shift power imbalances and unequal decision-making authority that favor federal agencies and established environmental groups. Diversity and inclusion rhetoric suggests that if more

underrepresented groups are included, problems of equity will be addressed. However, this can mask the need for overhauling systems and institutions that were built on the exclusion of indigenous peoples and racial minorities. Capacity building for indigenous and local groups needs to include building power, not just skills and knowledge within existing colonial systems.

Tokenism and individual representation

The participants express concern about being tokenized and used as a symbol of inclusivity without providing meaningful change for their community. One participant in particular questions the value of her presence on the stage and emphasizes her commitment to genuine representation and empowerment.

"I turned down Our Ocean Panama, because when I spoke at Our Ocean Palau, at the end when I talked about the military it got cut off because it's the US Department of State. So, after that I said no. They don't really want me; they're putting my face to this to say 'hey look, we're inclusive'. And that's not what I'm about. Like, what does it really do for my people if I'm in front of the freaking stage? It just does stuff for me. I'm not here to be tokenized. They don't even pay you! They didn't pay me for doing that."

The inclusion of indigenous representatives on boards, committees, and at conferences is not equivalent to Indigenous governance authority or self-determination over lands, waters, and resources. Token representation does not equate to meaningful decision-making power or consent.

Militarization and environmental impacts

One participant highlights the importance of discussing the environmental impacts of militarization, an issue that was censored during her speech at the conference. This demonstrates the silencing of critical perspectives and the potential limitations of mainstream environmental discourse.

“There was a paper written by two military scientists who went to Pagan - and they call it ‘de facto MPA’ – they said that because the military limits this area, makes Pagan off limits to fishing while they’re bombing. It’s de facto conservation because locals won’t be up there killing all the fish. They literally put ‘That’s it! The damage they, the military, do is minimal.’ Imagine that that’s the science coming out of Gani. And they don’t include locals. Imagine that.”

Militarization of lands and waters, not just in the Marianas but across the Pacific, undermines environmental justice and indigenous sovereignty. Military exercises are exempted from national environmental policies despite being a major polluter and controller of natural resources, especially in the Pacific.

Sovereignty and decision-making in conservation

One participant contrasts the decision-making power of Palau with the challenges faced by the CNMI, Guam, American Samoa, and Puerto Rico, where overlapping systems and federal control limit local autonomy and agency in conservation efforts.

Internalized stereotypes and local resistance

The participants note the difficulties of navigating local resistance, as some community members have internalized harmful stereotypes about their own management capabilities. This adds another layer to the complex power dynamics that shape conservation efforts in the region. In addition, there is a tendency to frame environmental injustices experienced by indigenous groups as "unintended consequences" of conservation rather than the result of inherently unjust and colonial systems. This framing absolves agencies of responsibility for remedying harms.

These experiences demonstrate the interconnection between contemporary conservation and settler-militarization that has become the status quo in the Northern Marianas. We need political solutions, not just administrative attempts at diversity and inclusion, and we need support for self-determination.

CHAPTER 7. EEJ: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Are equity and environmental justice possible under settler-colonial systems? How do we reconcile motives of military and imperial expansion with genuine investment in conservation and Indigenous Chamorro futures? To start, we need to include Indigenous voices in governance, which means giving the US Representative from the CNMI a voice in Congress, as Congress has plenary power over the territories. Additionally, the federal government needs to honor the agreement embodied in the Covenant that grants Chamorros the right to own their lands and waters. And we should consider inafa'maolek and its application in environmental management and governance. Inafa'maolek is rooted in mutual aid and reciprocity, but it is not one-sided. Part of the value is generosity, but it is not endless giving or even altruism. You give inafa'maolek to establish a relationship, but it cannot work if the other side does not give back.

Real environmental justice will require reparations, territorial returns, policy changes, and power shifts - not just increasing diversity alone. Equity cannot be reached without a meaningful foundation of decolonization, Indigenous land and water rights, and strategies for empowering Indigenous governance over environmental management.

7.1 INDIGENOUS RESURGENCE

The struggle for ocean equity must be grounded in a reclamation of Chamorro ways of knowing and being. This means moving beyond simply including Chamorro perspectives in marine conservation efforts, to centering these perspectives and acknowledging authority where its due. Audra Simpson's ideas speak to the importance of co-resistance and building alliances across communities. In the CNMI, this could involve building alliances between the Indigenous Chamorro and native Carolinian communities, and other groups fighting for environmental

justice and ocean equity more broadly. By working together, these groups can create a more powerful and effective movement for decolonization and environmental justice.

Simpson's emphasis on creating new realities and futures is particularly relevant to the CNMI context, where marine conservation efforts have historically been dominated by external actors and interests. By centering Indigenous Chamorro perspectives and ways of knowing, and by working together across communities, it is possible to create a more just and sustainable future for the islands and their marine resources.

7.2 GROUNDED IN INAFA'MAOLEK

Incorporating the traditional Chamorro principle of inafa'maolek into modern coastal management efforts can lead to more just and sustainable approaches that respect the unique values and knowledge of the Indigenous Chamorro and native Carolinian communities in the CNMI.

Community Engagement and Collaboration

Let local communities lead in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of coastal management initiatives. This collaborative approach can facilitate the sharing of traditional knowledge and practices, fostering mutual understanding and respect between stakeholders and reinforcing the principles of interdependence and reciprocity.

Cultural Sensitivity Training

Provide training and education for non-Indigenous coastal managers and policymakers on the concept of inafa'maolek and other indigenous values, fostering a deeper appreciation for the cultural context and importance of these principles in the CNMI.

Holistic and Ecosystem-based Management

Adopt management approaches that recognize the interconnectedness of human and non-human entities within ecosystems. This holistic perspective aligns with the principle of inafa'maolek, emphasizing the importance of maintaining balance and harmony within the environment.

Adaptive Management

Encourage flexibility and adaptability in coastal management by incorporating traditional knowledge and practices that have evolved over time. Inafa'maolek can serve as a guiding principle in developing adaptive strategies that account for both the social and ecological dimensions of coastal systems.

Protection and Restoration of Cultural Sites

Prioritize the protection and restoration of culturally significant sites, such as traditional fishing grounds, sacred spaces, and historical sites, to reinforce the kinship and connections between humans, non-human entities, and the environment.

Recognition of Indigenous Rights

Advocate for the recognition and protection of Indigenous rights to land, resources, and self-determination, as well as the incorporation of indigenous values and perspectives into governance structures and decision-making processes. By integrating the principle of inafa'maolek into coastal management efforts, we can develop more resilient, equitable, and culturally appropriate strategies that not only advance conservation efforts but also foster strong relationships and community well-being in the CNMI.

CONCLUSION

Addressing the systemic injustices rooted in settler-colonialism and promoting decolonization is crucial for achieving true equity and environmental justice in the Marianas Islands and Oceania. Superficial initiatives that focus solely on diversity, equity and inclusion or environmental justice without critically analyzing power dynamics, historical legacies, and the continuing dynamics of oppression, ultimately perpetuate colonial logics and maintain power hierarchies. Decolonization should not be confused with any social justice endeavor, but rather seen as a critical introspective analysis of power, history, and sociopolitics. By uncovering the histories and stories of the colonized, decolonization can challenge and transform the prevailing narratives that reproduce colonial dynamics of exploitation and marginalization.

Within the context of ocean governance and coastal management in the Northern Marianas, decolonization requires a shift away from dominant Western approaches to conservation and a recognition of the expertise, epistemologies, and lived experiences of Indigenous Chamorros. This means moving beyond tokenism and engaging in meaningful power-sharing and co-creation with Chamorro people.

The top-down approaches often employed by federal agencies and mainstream environmental organizations in implementing EEJ initiatives are inconsistent with the goals of equity and justice. To rectify this, intentional acts must be taken to address the injustices done indigenous ocean peoples done in pursuit of settler-colonial domination. This includes expanding efforts beyond inclusivity and participation to encompass acts of reparation, land and water return, policy changes, and power shifts that preempt Indigenous environmental authority over conservation.

Addressing the challenges of equity and environmental justice under settler-colonial systems requires concerted efforts and collaboration from various stakeholders. To advance the cause of Chamorro self-determination and promote a more just and sustainable future for the Mariana Islands, I propose the following recommendations:

CNMI Government

1. Advocate for greater autonomy and decision-making power in coastal management and natural resource governance, ensuring meaningful participation of Indigenous Chamorro communities.
2. Strengthen partnerships and collaboration with local Indigenous organizations and community groups to integrate traditional ecological knowledge and practices into policies and management strategies.
3. Invest in educational programs that prioritize Chamorro cultural revitalization, language preservation, and the development of local expertise in environmental affairs.
4. Embrace inafa'maolek as a guiding principle in environmental management and governance, promoting reciprocal relationships and responsible care.

Non-governmental Organizations

1. Support local Indigenous-led initiatives and organizations working towards environmental justice and indigenous self-determination in the CNMI.
2. Invest in Chamorro academics and researchers, capacity-building programs and scholarships that create opportunities for Chamorros to contribute to environmental research and advocacy.

3. Support global and local initiatives that focus on land and water rights, decolonization, and Indigenous self-determination.

Federal Government

1. Give the CNMI Representative, and every territory representative, a voice and voting power in Congress to ensure the representation of Indigenous interests and perspectives in decision-making processes that affect the islands.
2. Honor the agreement embodied in the Covenant by upholding Chamorro land and water rights, facilitating land return, and supporting initiatives for indigenous self-governance over environmental management.
3. Allocate resources for reparations, policy changes, and power shifts that address historical and ongoing injustices faced by Chamorro communities.

Researchers

1. Acknowledge the settler-colonial roots of environmental injustice and actively work towards decolonizing research practices and knowledge production.

Challenge existing colonial structures by actively recruiting and supporting Chamorro academics, providing opportunities for their voices and perspectives to be heard.
2. Recognize the importance of Indigenous peoples in shaping sustainable and just solutions. Engage in research collaborations that prioritize and amplify indigenous knowledge systems, fostering meaningful partnerships with local communities and organizations.

3. Advocate for broader forms of education beyond traditional academia, valuing and promoting diverse knowledge systems and forms of learning that are rooted in indigenous epistemologies.

People of the CNMI

1. Embrace exercises that strengthen Chamorro collective continuance and actively participate in initiatives that promote Chamorro cultural integrity, health, economic vitality, and political order.
2. Support local indigenous organizations, community-driven projects, and grassroots movements that aim to advance self-determination and environmental justice.
3. Engage in dialogue and collaboration with fellow Chamorro people across the Marianas archipelago, recognizing the shared struggles and aspirations for indigenous sovereignty and well-being.

Historically, the US and other global north countries have engaged in what can be described as “ocean grabbing” policies, where the control, and management of marine resources are predominantly dictated by external powers, often at the expense of Indigenous communities. These policies have resulted in the dispossession and loss of Indigenous territories and the marginalization of Indigenous voices in decision-making processes. These discussions are particularly urgent in the face of emerging discussions surrounding the Blue Economy and the anticipation of major environmental policy changes like the 30x30 Initiative, which aims to conserve 30% of the US’s oceans through the sweeping establishment of marine sanctuaries and protected areas.

By providing the CNMI with the power to self-determine, Indigenous Chamorros can assert their rights, protect their territories, and actively participate in the management and governance of marine resources. Without this empowerment, Chamorros are at risk of losing even more of their traditional territory, as their voices may continue to be marginalized in the implementation of marine conservation initiatives.

Furthermore, Indigenous Chamorros possess invaluable knowledge and expertise regarding their local marine ecosystems, accumulated over generations of living in harmony with the ocean. This knowledge is essential for the effective and sustainable management of marine resources. By empowering Indigenous Chamorros, their perspectives and traditional ecological knowledge can be integrated into decision making processes, leading to more inclusive, culturally appropriate, and ecologically sound conservation efforts.

To address urgent environmental challenges and ensure the long-term preservation of marine ecosystems, it is imperative that federal environmental policies do not usurp Indigenous self-determination. By supporting the rights and authority of Indigenous Chamorros over their territories, including recognizing the agreements established in the Covenant, we can foster equitable partnerships, avoid further dispossession, and promote environmental justice in ocean governance.

By engaging in collective continuance and embracing the principles of inafa'maolek (Barker, 2006) (Delgado, 2019) (Liboiron, 2021) (Million, 2018), Chamorros across the Marianas archipelago and the diaspora can actively support and participate in the Indigenous struggle for self-determination. Through decolonization, equity, and environmental justice, the Chamorro community can reclaim their cultural integrity, health, economic vitality, and political order while navigating the complexities of settler-colonial forces of change.

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