

The Sinahi: The New Moon Necklace

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The crescent moon shaped necklace known as the *Sinahi* has been found in ancient *Chamoru* (Chamorro) burial sites dated from 800 A.D. to 1700 A.D. (Babauta, Kuam, Cunningham 18, Perez 577). The symbolic meaning of the *Sinahi* to the ancient *Chamoru* people has long been lost (Lizama). However, the *Chamoru* youth of today still wear the *Sinahi* as a symbol of their heritage (Babauta, Kuam, Owen). This research paper will explore the past and present of the *Sinahi* on Guahan (Guam), how it was made, what will be introduced at the Bard College exhibit, and how it helps the modern culture of the *Chamorus* discover our ancient past (Kuam, Perez 579).

The *Chamoru* people settled in the Mariana Islands at least 4,000 years ago (Aguon, Cunningham 15, Hoppe 15, Illarmo). During this time, our ancestors thrived on land and sea (Cunningham 30, Hoppe 15, Lizama 13, Na'Puti 848, Owen, Perez 577). *Inafa' maolek* (respect, balance, and interconnectedness) was central to the way of life (Hoppe 16, Lizama 91, Na'Puti 847). Our contact with foreigners disrupted our way of living (Hezel, Hoppe 17, Lizama 8, Perez 578). They came with their education, and we were educated their way (Aguon, Lizama 2). We learned their language, but they did not learn ours (Cunningham 4, Lizama 35, Na'Puti 307). If we did have a history, we were told to forget it because it was a history of savages (Cunningham 55, Lizama 35, Perez 578). Their manners and ways of living became our motto (Lizama 28, Tydingco). Suddenly we open our eyes and see our land being exploited (Cunningham 30, Hoppe 36, Lizama 29, Na'Puti 842, Nash). Our ancestors were murdered and enslaved, our values discarded, and our culture vanishes (Cunningham 167, Hoppe 19, Lizama 20, Na'Puti 843, Perez 579). Now we try to sift through the mess to identify what is our culture and what is not (Cunningham 55, Hezel). Our present awareness attempts to build a nation from a U.S. colony (Aguon, Cunningham 175, Hoppe 18, Hotta, Lizama 35, Na'Puti 302, Owen). In the 1970s, the United States experienced a wave of black, brown, red, and yellow nationalist movements

(Cunningham 176, Lizama 12). On Guahan, this manifested in a cultural renaissance that had prominence, social, and political implications (Cunningham 56, Lizama 6, Owen). In the early 1990s, Guahan witnessed the birth of *I Nasion Chamoru*, a grassroots indigenous rights movement (Hoppe 21, Na'Puti 848, Wyttenbach 181). On April 27, 1992, *I Nasion* occupied the local governor's complex located in Adelupe for five months, forcing the local government to enforce the *Chamoru* Land Trust Act (Guam Palau CNMI FSM News, Hoppe 22, Wyttenbach 181). By law, only persons identified as indigenous *Chamoru* can lease the land on Guahan, as written in the *Chamoru* Land Trust Act (Hoppe 21, Hotta, Wyttenbach 181). Besides their political action, *I Nasion* members became widely known for their traditional body ornamentation, whose founder, Angel L.G. Santos, wore a *Sinahi* neckpiece used as a political standpoint against the U.S. government (Kuam, Wyttenbach 182). It is evidence into our long-lost ancient heritage, an indigenous identity that has become more prominent today (Babauta, Kuam, Owen). A long-time tradition, I hope, will continue to thrive (Hezel, Perez 577).

The moon has played a role in many cultures throughout the history of time. The same can be said about the *Chamoru* culture (Cunningham 3). As in ancient cultures, the creation of art in the context of jewelry is a manifestation of their own identity and their sense of adornment to their bodies (Babauta, Perez 577). Each ancient culture developed this, and the *Chamoru* people were no exception. In the shape of a half-moon, the new moon (no moon phase), the *Sinahi* is a symbolic necklace that signifies a beginning (Cunningham 35). It is a simple reference to the first moon, the shape of the new moon, and its use as a timeline (Cunningham 30). The *Sinahi* has been found in ancient pre-contact *Chamoru* gravesites, among other artifacts (Aguon, Kuam, Na'Puti 846). The *Chamoru* people can be found on Guahan, Saipan, Tinian, and Rota, which make up a Commonwealth of the United States (Cunningham 1, Ladd). Male warriors dove in the ocean beyond the reef and picked up these giant clamshells, then brought it back on land to carve them off. Carved from fossilized giant *Hima* (tridacna) saltwater clams, the *Sinahi* is a symbol of *Chamoru* culture,

suggesting power and greatness (Cunningham 23, Kuam). Archaeologists have discovered the first *Sinahi* on a tiny island called Saipan, a thirty-minute flight across the Pacific sea from Guahan (Cunningham 18). It was found to be much denser and heavier, weighing around two pounds. Recent discoveries have also found the *Sinahi* to contain basalt (volcanic rock), which suggests different villages were using different materials. Red and orange Spondylus (spiny oyster shell), *Ifit* (wood), and animal bones are pieces that were also carved by hand. Back then, it would take a year to carve a *Hima Sinahi*, and the shaping of animal bone took over a year to make. Rocks were used to shape the *Hima* into a crescent moon, and it was not carved in an entirely solid white piece. Some natural blemishes can be seen on the *Sinahi*. So like the moon, it represents the different phases so that one will see various shades of light gray and brown speckling in it.

Men who had an important position in the family or village wore the *Sinahi* (Babauta). They can be seen wearing a neckpiece around their neck to signify their status and accomplishments. One example is when men decide to cut down trees and use the wood during the first moon because it is believed during that time, building a home is twice as hard since there was no present moonlight. The chief of the tribe (*maga'lâhi*), on the other hand, is a symbol of strength and leadership as he is the head of the clan and the entire village (Hoppe 16). The significance of the *Sinahi*, worn by the *maga'lâhi*, is that he is considered the first moon, after proving himself to be the most worthy and respected overall. It is only then he would acquire power and greatness from the entire village and clan.

The *Chamoru* culture during the pre-contact period used the *Sinahi* to signify their status and accomplishments (Cunningham 30). Now when society began to develop further and further, the art began to thrive. These are icons that have become very symbolic when the changes in society have become more rapid. The people want a sense of identity, a sense of place to display their heritage (Perez 579). Modern-day *Sinahi*, or brightly colored Spondylus necklaces, are not only made from giant clams today (Babauta, Bennett). Indigenous jewelry-makers of my generation

have begun to mass-produce the *Sinahi* on Guahan and overseas from a variety of other shells, such as abalone shells (Babauta). Ancient stones, cow bone, intertwined fishhooks; deer horn, whalebone, clay molds, wild boar tusks, fishbone, and *carabao* (water buffalo) horn are now being used (Babauta). The use of power tools to shape the shell and sandpaper to smooth the pendant down is applied (Babauta). The main focus is to try to keep the neckpiece as natural looking as possible, to keep it similar to what our ancestors may have worn (Babauta). Unique creations include a blue coral *Sinahi* with a red oyster inlay, three-headed dragon orange oyster necklaces, and contemporary fish-shaped pendant necklaces, to name a few (Babauta).

There has been a resurgence in traditional *Chamoru* jewelry making in the last decade (Babauta). As a native of Guahan, the primary objective today is cultural awareness, so the materials used are not as necessary (Babauta, Cunningham 56, Kuam, Owen, Perez 579). Though the *Hima* continues to symbolize a piece of Guahan or a piece of the ocean, a neckpiece made out of this giant clamshell is highly recommended for island locals and tourists (Cunningham 23). This distinction reveals the broader political, economic, and social context on Guam and its relationship to the U.S (Babauta). As *I Nasion* members continue to fight against the U.S. government for stolen lands dating back to the 1960s, the symbolic meaning of the *Sinahi* continues to grow as the island itself continues to develop and modernize into an independent nation (Babauta). It is increasingly common to see men and women wearing carved shells in the shapes worn by their ancestors or symbolic of ancient *Chamoru* times that signify the island's unity against oppression and U.S. occupation. Anybody can wear a *Sinahi* provided they know the cultural significance of it, even if they are not *Chamoru* (Kuam). True artisans with indigenous roots said their pieces must be earned by their wearers, and worn with respect for *Chamoru* ancestors (Babauta). They will ask the reason why one wants the *Sinahi*. It is believed one does not have to have the largest piece, which is usually desired. It is thought that one's karma, one's character, and the person one is that makes the piece enormous (Babauta). Though for people who ask for the *Sinahi* to be made large into a neckpiece, this logic will not be

understood; hence, their request will be denied. *Sinahi* nowadays is not something a true artisan would typically make. On the other hand, it appears that hundreds of *Chamoru* locals nowadays are making replicas of *Sinahis*—a "Sinahi R Us" syndrome focused on making a profit. True artisans feel as a carver or crafter, one must refine one's work as one grows, one's skills should be growing, and one's refinement is the ultimate goal (Kuam). The *Chamoru* people are known to pass down this knowledge to the next generation (Cunningham 1, Hoppe, Lizama 3, Tydingco). Though because the people have so much westernized influence in their lives, that influence is making locals feel like they have to have what money can buy, and what foreigners want us to buy (Hezel). True artisans do not like working for money that is perceived as not right. It is always nice to earn money, but it is believed that when one creates something, the dollar sign should not be the main reason that dictates why one is carving a *Sinahi* overall (Kuam).

The main necklace style I will present at the Bard Exhibit is a stunning hand carved indigenous *Chamoru Sinahi* piece, made from *Hima* (giant clamshell) and *Puka* shells (cone sea snail) with a carved *Ifit* (Guahan territorial tree) wooden clasp choker from the island of Guahan (Babauta). It is traditionally shaped like a half-moon, with two holes drilled at each end through which cords are attached. It is a heavy piece weighing in at 7.3 oz. and will fit a size 18-inch neck. There are natural blemishes and inclusions, such as minor and shallow dimples with light gray and brown speckling. Since it is of a giant clamshell, which is an extremely dense, strong material, the *Hima* is not perfect though it is a gift from the sea. The *Hima* is identified according to the size of the pendant used to produce the jewelry. The giant clamshell is approximately 3 1/2" L 3/4" W 1 3/4" H-inches in diameter (*guini*). The entire length excluding the clasps is 17.5". The interior circumference when clasped is 18". This style is relatively long and wound around the neck at least once with the pendant directly hanging center, between the collarbone and shoulder level. The condition of the *Hima* is excellent, with no chips or cracks, and is smooth. The *Puka* shells are also in excellent condition and not cracked nor chipped. This specific object has taken on significance in contemporary art

and is currently worn as a neckpiece or incorporated into other *Chamoru* jewelry designs (Kuam). It will be made to order from a true indigenous artisan from Guahan named Julie "Jill" Quichocho-Benavente, so the length of time of the *Sinahi* in my family is relatively new. With the help of my parents solely responsible in the building of the third museum in Guahan's entire history (Bennett, Perez 579), what I would like to know more about is the female version of the *Sinahi* that is shaped like a full moon. It is believed that men may start the new moon phase, but women, on the other hand, complete the entire moon cycle (Hoppe 29). Unfortunately, at this time, accurate data of this recent archaeological finding will not be disclosed until a later date.

The *Chamoru* culture is so precious, and we have so much to be proud of and to be thankful for (Babauta, Lizama). We are the first civilization in Micronesia, in this region of the Pacific, and we have been here the longest (Aguon, Cunningham 15, Na'Puti 301). That means we have had the most time to accumulate so much knowledge and wisdom. Back then, the way one earns their jewelry and gain one's status is through their accomplishments. Though nowadays, it is not the same because not everybody goes hunting and fishing, not everybody can do the same things that would qualify one to have earned their adornment (Babauta, Cunningham 14, Hoppe 16, Lizama 28, Owen, Tydingco). So now I guess our tradition has become a little bit more lenient. The primary function of the *Sinahi* acts as an anchor, a symbolic meaning to our 4,000-year ancient history (Aguon, Cunningham 18, Hoppe 15, Illarmo). It represents our values and principles of *inafa' maolek*, central to our way of living life (Hoppe 16, Lizama 69, Na'Puti 847, Perez 578, Tydingco). My lifetime is just an extension of that. I am just here to accumulate more knowledge and wisdom so that I can continue to carve, shape, refine, and guide our future generation someday (Babauta, Cunningham 6, Hoppe 13, Kuam, Lizama 3, Owen, Perez 579). It is important to recognize that the *Chamoru* society is matrilineal (Cunningham 11, Hoppe 29). *Chamorus* believed in the ultimate power of women as the source of life and the controller of their environment (Hoppe 29). "In the home, it is the woman who rules, and her husband does not dare give an order contrary to her wishes, nor punish the

children, for she will turn upon him and beat him" (as qtd. in Souder 149). I look forward to learning more about the female version of the *Sinahi* when the research of this precious archaeological finding will be disclosed in the future.

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