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The importance of island oral history

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THE history of the people of Micronesia and their engagement with the outside world has not been fully documented in print — it is a neglected area of academic scholarship.

Historical literatures often mention the islander topic as a footnote since Micronesians were assumed to have lesser roles and participation during their colonial era.

“To this end indigenous perspective of history has been absent from the main corpus of historical literature,” said Gonzaga Puas, PhD, in his 2016 thesis titled, “The Federated States of Micronesia’s Engagement with the Outside World: Control, Self-Preservation, and Continuity.”

Dr. Puas is with the College of Asia and the Pacific, at the Australian National University in Canberra, Australia.

“Despite the distorted nature of imperial history, which portrayed Micronesians as poor savages and unsophisticated people, there is an emerging trend of historical discourse contradicting these images,” he said.

He said Micronesians have been dealing successfully with the outside world since the colonization period.

“This argument is sustained by examination of oral histories, secondary sources, personal experience, interviews, and field research to reconstruct how Micronesian internal processes continued rather than succumbing to the different waves of colonization. Micronesian cultures and identities were not destroyed by colonization but instead Micronesians recontextualized the changing conditions to suit their own circumstances.”

Islanders Mindy Taitano, Melisa Somorang and Eileen Kintol said traditional and contemporary dances allow them to cherish traditions while acknowledging current societal conditions.

They also believe that oral history must be passed on to the next generation.

Dr. Takuya Nagaoka is the executive director of the non-government organization, Pasifika Renaissance.

Established in Sept. 2014 in Japan, Pasifika Renaissance aims to preserve and promote the cultural and historical heritage of the Pacific Islands by revitalizing traditional culture and empowering local communities.



FROM LEFT, EILEEN KINTOL, MINDY TAITANO AND MELISA D. SOMORANG PREPARE FLOWERS FOR THE TIUL YOUTH DANCERS. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Pasifika Renaissance also provides technical assistance to relevant agencies and organizations.

Its current major project is documenting oral traditions in Pohnpei by interviewing older Micronesians who share their memories and stories.

Dr. Nagaoka said in Pohnpei, due to the new world of technology, the younger generation's interest in traditional culture has declined.

But he said the Pasifika Renaissance project has been welcomed and supported by traditional chiefs, elders and other community members.

They want to document their stories on film so these can be shared online with the younger generation.

With permission from the FSM Office of National Archives, Culture and Historic Preservation, Pasifika Renaissance began filming stories in 2015 and sharing more than 200 narrative videos on its YouTube channel, <https://goo.gl/U5HrjL>.

These stories include legends, traditional tales, historical events, customs, chants and songs from Pohnpei, Pingelap, Mwoakilloa, Sapwuahfik, Nukuoro and Kapingamarangi as well as two island groups of Chuuk state: the Mortlocks and Namonuito

"We hope to add more videos from Pohnpei, where we began our work just this year in collaboration with the Division of Historic Preservation and Cultural Affairs, Pohnpei State Department of Land," said Nagaoka.

"We hope by watching these videos, people can continue to pass on these stories to their children and younger relatives," he added.


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