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Latte in the Marianas: by the community for the community: edited by Kelly G. Marsh (Taitano) and Jolie Liston, Guam, The Latte in the Marianas: Art, Icon, and Archaeology Project, 2021, 130pp., \$65.00 USD (hardback), ISBN 978-0-578-52109-1.

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BOOK REVIEW

Latte in the Marianas: By the community for the community, edited by Kelly G. Marsh (Taitano) and Jolie Liston, Guam, *The Latte in the Marianas: Art, Icon, and Archaeology Project*, 2021, 130pp., \$65.00 USD (hardback), ISBN 978-0-578-52109-1.

Much has been written by scholars and cultural professionals about community archaeology and heritage over recent decades. In this journal, for instance, a search for ‘community’ registers over 1,200 results. Unfortunately, though, well-produced community-generated heritage publications remain relatively few and far between, especially in the Asia Pacific. That is why it is gratifying to see this colourful, large-format volume from the Mariana Islands in Western Micronesia. These fifteen tropical islands form a south-north arc lying northeast of the Philippines, from where they were first settled some 4,000 years ago. The large island of Guam is the southernmost landmass, and tiny Farallon de Pajaros the northernmost. Missionised by Spain in 1668, Guam has been a Territory of the United States since 1898, following the Spanish-American War. The remaining islands today form the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. After a chequered 300-year colonial history, they became a separate US Territory in 1986. The islands’ Indigenous inhabitants are known as CHamoru, or Chamorro.

The ‘latte’ of the title are variably sized stone pillars usually 1–2 metres tall, with inverted, roughly semi-hemispherical capstones. Groups of these two-piece structures were used throughout the Marianas to support wood-and-thatch structures from about AD1000 until Spanish colonisation became well-established in the late 1600s. As the volume states, ‘Latte are a significant symbol and treasured birthright to contemporary CHamoru, signifying heritage, identity, and nationalism, and maintaining a community rooted in land and culture’ (1).

True to the subtitle ‘by the community for the community’, the work brings together contributions from a wide range of stakeholders, including community elders, local cultural practitioners, artists and other creatives, and archaeologists and heritage managers, all wrangled into shape by editors Kelly Marsh and Jolie Liston. From 2019 to 2021, when the volume was being pulled together, Marsh was a Senator in the Guam Legislature. While this fact is relevant to the production of the book, particularly in terms of her community ‘reach’ and capacity to help secure support from contributors and sponsors, she also has a BA and MA in Micronesian Studies from the University of Guam and a PhD in Cultural Heritage Studies from Charles Sturt University, Australia. Liston is an archaeologist and heritage professional who has worked in Micronesia for decades. She is no stranger to inclusive publication, being, for example, a co-editor of *Pacific Island Heritage. Archaeology, Identity & Community* (Liston, Clark, and Alexander 2011). That work included numbers of Pacific Islands people amongst its authors, but is much less colourful and community-oriented in its production values than the book under review here.

The book is presented in four lavishly illustrated parts that cover various aspects of the latte phenomenon while attempting to ‘weave the ancient CHamoru lifeway into current interpretations and expressions of ethnicity and identity’ (1). The first section, much of it written in both CHamoru and English, sees elders and other local cultural practitioners describe and explain the cultural and spiritual intricacies of latte. This firmly establishes the priority of local voices and local significances in the book’s approach. The next part is characterised as the ancestors speaking through the physical heritage remaining in the landscape. It entails archaeologists and oral and documentary historians describing technical details of latte construction, chronology and distribution across the landscape, all in accessible language with abundant figures and photographs. Unlike the other sections, this one is

mostly written by expatriates. Many are well-known names in Pacific archaeology and a good proportion of them have lived most, if not all, of their lives in the Marianas. One piece in this section written by a CHamoru oral historian is presented in CHamoru and English, but it is the only example.

The third section of the volume, *Bringing life to latte*, showcases local artists and other creatives. It is almost entirely in English but is visually the most arresting part of the book. In the introduction, the editors declaim that the works presented in this section ‘are powerful windows into ancient CHamoru culture that inspire and promote national identity’ (1). Last but by no means least, the final section canvasses a range of matters, again almost exclusively in English. Entitled ‘Our journey forward’, it primarily concerns the diverse ways in which latte are preserved as ‘an iconic symbol’ (97) of CHamoru culture and identity. It expands on the heritage work of elders and other cultural practitioners, creatives, educators and business people alongside that of government historic preservation authorities, museums, research archaeologists, and charitable foundations. Here the nostalgia that informs the entire volume is brought to a pointed denouement, in the proclamation that ‘the latte have been and are the foundation for CHamorus to build a new decolonial consciousness and neutralise the colonial maladies that have long afflicted them’ (133). This heartfelt assertion is explicitly developed as a call for action in the penultimate contribution before the epilogue, with four striking images by CHamoru digital artist Kie Susioco declaring: ‘one day we will free ourselves’; ‘know your roots’; ‘latte of freedom [a monument on Guam] isn’t actual’; and the Star Wars-inspired ‘Rise of the CHamoru Rebel Alliance’, the accompanying text for which claims that ‘as long as CHamoru remain colonized, we will continue to resist’ (pp. 134–135). In a very Pacific way, the book’s final contribution, and then Kelly Marsh’s epilogue, dial down the political rhetoric to finish off on a more harmonious and accommodating request to: ‘Let us each be a part of safeguarding the legacy of latte, ensuring its continuation for the next thousand years’ (138).

The volume’s end papers are quite academic, with endnotes and two pages of almost entirely archaeological further reading, followed by a lengthy list of credits for the book’s stunning illustrations, an illustrated list of contributors’ biographies, and a final statement of respect for the ancestral spirits.

So, what to make of this publication? When I was asked to review it, I imagined something more like the community productions one commonly sees: short, softcover, small format, lots of heart but often not very strong on content or production values. The gorgeous coffee table book I received really took me by surprise! It is, however, much more than just exceptional presentation. It is also more than a couple of expats – albeit ones who undoubtedly count as locals – adding a bit of an Indigenous flavour to yet another well-meaning project that does things ‘*for* communities, rather than *with* them’, as the editor of this journal and a colleague once put it (Waterton and Smith 2010, 7). A lot of thought and interpersonal mediation has gone into presenting comprehensively yet accessibly the many dimensions of the latte phenomenon. This includes prioritising CHamoru voice as well optimising the breadth and depth of the volume’s coverage, the vocabulary and tone of the text, including the bilingual elements, and the selection of illustrations.

While it is undoubtedly nostalgic, the volume’s wistfulness does not overwhelm the optimistic sense of purpose regarding the future of latte as a symbol of CHamoru solidarity in the face of the many challenges of life in a place such as the Marianas. As made clear throughout, first and foremost in this connection is the islands’ complex history of colonisation. First there was Spain, then the US in the case of Guam (not counting a couple of years under Japan in WWII) and Germany, Japan and the US in the northern Marianas. This history has produced a difficult sociopolitical landscape characterised not least by a seemingly permanent separation of Guam – the intensely militarised ‘tip of the spear’ in US defence arrangements in the Asia-Pacific – from the rest of the archipelago. This matter is raised in different ways a number of times in the volume and is obviously a keenly felt wound in the CHamoru community. The book makes clear that other

historical matters impinge as well, especially the loss of cultural knowledge and environmental integrity in the face of missionisation and other development, common themes for colonised peoples the world over.


Does the book romantically suggest that the strengthening of CHamoru community through the preservation of latte will be some sort of ‘cure for all manner of social problems’ that undoubtedly flow from this history (Waterton and Smith 2010, 6)? I don’t think so, given the empirical evidence presented throughout the book for the ubiquity of latte symbolism in all walks of life across the Marianas. In other words, the volume’s content and optimistic view of the place of latte in Marianas society reflect the contemporary lived reality of Marianas communities. This assessment is further evidenced by the way the volume seems to align with Fraser’s ‘politics of recognition’ as described by Waterton and Smith (2010, 10–12). By this I mean that while community politics would unquestionably have played a role in the selection of who wrote and/or illustrated what, there seems to have been reasonable ‘parity of participation’ (Waterton and Smith 2010, 10) amongst the volume’s contributors. Given the complexities of working with any community anywhere, achieving consensus means a lot of negotiation and compromise, and often ends up satisfying no-one. That those involved in the Latte Project managed to produce something as intellectually substantial, socially inclusive and aesthetically pleasing as this volume is a testament to their acuity in managing the politics of recognition as well as their obvious capacities as knowledge holders, cultural practitioners, artists, business owners, archaeologists and heritage professionals. The work is a model of its kind.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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