Documenting the Endangered Chamorro Culture

This project will produce a photo-essay book that documents one of the world’s oldest and most unique cultures before a massive U.S. military buildup takes place on its homeland, Guam.

I. A precious culture

The Chamorro have inhabited the Marianas, a tiny island chain in the South Pacific, for over 4,000 years.

Living in balance with nature and respect for ancestors constitutes the basic tenet of Chamorro culture.
Ancestral spirits are believed to reside in the nunu, a type of banyan tree that strikingly resembles the 'spirit tree' in the film, Avatar.

Chamorro culture also holds one of the world’s richest repositories of knowledge about herbal medicine.
II. A history of resilience

Guam has been occupied by Spain, Japan, and the US for over five centuries. It has been a very difficult history; in the 1600s, for example, Spanish colonists killed nearly all of the Chamorro men and forbade use of the language. Nevertheless, mothers secretly taught the language to their children, and the people managed to subversively pass their culture on.

III. U.S. military buildup

Over the next decade, the population of Guam will increase by 50% as up to 60,000 Marines and related personnel will be transferred from Japan.
Hundreds of Chamorro families will be relocated, sacred jungles and burial grounds will be razed, and over 70 of acres of reef will be cleared to open a channel for aircraft carriers.

We hasten to underscore that we are pursuing this project with educational, not political, motivations. As a practical matter, the next few years present a final opportunity to visually document much of what remains of the Chamorro culture.

IV. Proposed project: The ‘AÂ’s (‘ABCs’) of Chamorro

A team of educators and digital media specialists at the University of Guam and Boston University will produce a beautiful photo-essay book; one that combines simple, concise text and over 200 professional photographs to introduce a cultural topic along with each letter of the Chamorro alphabet.

Here are a few, sample pages of a developing chapter on âmot, or herbal medicine:
Chamorro

For thousands of years, one of the most important skills in Chamorro society was that of making ámot; medicine produced from jungle plants.

Japanese

Comprehension Questions

1. When did European settlers first arrive on Guam?
2. What did those settlers bring to Guam along with Western medicine?
3. According to Chamorro tradition, who is allowed to harvest medicinal plants from the jungle?
4. How many basic types of ámot are there, and what are they?
5. If patients are diagnosed with chetnot maipe, what are they sometimes instructed to do?

Language Review

Define each of these words.

1. taotaomo'na
2. suruhána
3. chetnot maipe
4. suruhánu
5. ámot
The book will mainly be marketed to tourists on Guam and school libraries across the U.S. It will be produced in a tri-lingual format, as over 95% of the tourists on Guam are Japanese. Retail sales revenues will be used to sell the books to schools throughout Guam and the Marianas at cost.

Anticipated retail price: $24.95 / Marianas school price: $7.00.

This project will raise national awareness of the Chamorro people, and give future generations of Chamorro a visual document of their precious, precarious culture.

V. Project leadership

Cyrus Konstantinakos, a Senior Lecturer in TESOL at Boston University, has spent the past two summers coordinating this project at the University of Guam. He will complete the project at UOG from January to August, 2012.

Here is an article on the project in The Daily Free Press:

In 2011 Konstantinakos published Art and Life in Rural Japan: Toho Village Through the Eyes of Its Youth, a photo-essay book written and photographed by children in a depopulating mountain village in southern Japan. It was a non-profit project, with revenues supporting the local school and victims of the 2011 earthquake in Japan. The book has received numerous accolades such as these:

“In this beautifully photographed book, the children of a small village provide an unusually powerful introduction to the Japanese language and culture.”

—Howard Gardner
Author: Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences

“This gem of a book takes readers beyond typical images of Japan and into the heart of a small mountain community. Simple, often poignant sentences in English and Japanese tell Toho's story, rich in history and culture. Stunning, full-color pictures capture verdant rice fields, jubilant school scenes, a lively festival, and expressive portraits of Toho's residents. A fascinating window into a vanishing way of life, this book holds appeal for both pleasure reading and reports.”

—School Library Journal

Here are a few, sample pages from that book:
Videos and additional information about this book may be accessed at www.tohovillage.org.

VI. Project supporters

• U.S. Department of Education
• University of Guam, Micronesian Language Institute
• Boston University, School of Education
• Boston University, Center for Global Citizenship (http://www.bu.edu/thurman/programs/cgc/)