

# A Tall Chamoru Latte, Please!

In this PoP Cultures essay, you will learn about the ancient Chamoru (chä **mor** ū) culture of Guam and their unique method of building homes.

Guam is an island and a U.S. Territory located in Micronesia. It is one of the areas studied by the scientists in the research article you read beginning on page 95. Guam's indigenous people are called Chamoru. In this culture, roles practiced by men and women are balanced, and responsibility and power are equally shared. The relationship between brothers and sisters is especially valued.

The Chamoru are thought to have arrived on Guam 3,500 years ago. **Archaeologists** believe that during **Common Era** (C.E.) 900–1521, the Chamoru cleared the land. The Chamoru managed the land with tools they

made from materials they found in Guam. Can you imagine making all your own tools with materials found only in your neighborhood? They then left the cut plants to decay on the ground before the ground was prepared for planting. As with many traditional cultures, the Chamoru probably rotated their planted fields, leaving a field to recover for a season or more after harvest.

The early Chamoru people fished and cultivated rice, breadfruit, coconut, ginger, bananas, and sugar cane. They also ate taro, yam, and arrowroot tubers. A tuber is an enlarged underground part of a plant, like a potato (**figures 17** and **18**). The Chamoru were highly skilled and knowledgeable of their environment.



**Figure 17.** Taro was an important food for the Chamoru. Courtesy photo by Amanda Uowolo.





**Figure 18.** Taro root, one of the Chamoru culture's most important foods. Courtesy photo by Amanda Uowolo.

## *Spelling Chamoru*

If you do an internet search for Chamoru, you will find that it is spelled in different ways. This case of multiple spellings is partly because the Chamoru culture was originally an oral culture. An oral culture is one that does not have a written language. Oral cultures taught knowledge through words, stories, and songs. Many cultures worldwide started as oral cultures before the introduction or development of written language. Because words were not written down, different spellings may have been used when words finally began to be written. Today, for example, different groups of people spell Chamoru in different ways. The Chamoru language began to be recorded in writing in 1668.

Imagine you live in an oral culture. Would you be reading these words right now? Why or why not?

Today, Chamoru culture is experiencing a revival after centuries of colonization. Colonization happens when an invading people steals land and resources from a local people and replaces the original culture's government with the government of the invader. As with most **indigenous** cultures, Chamoru recovery from colonization has required enormous commitment on the part of the Chamoru people. Chamoru cultural recovery is supported by the Chamoru culture's sacred relationship with Guam, her land, and oceans.

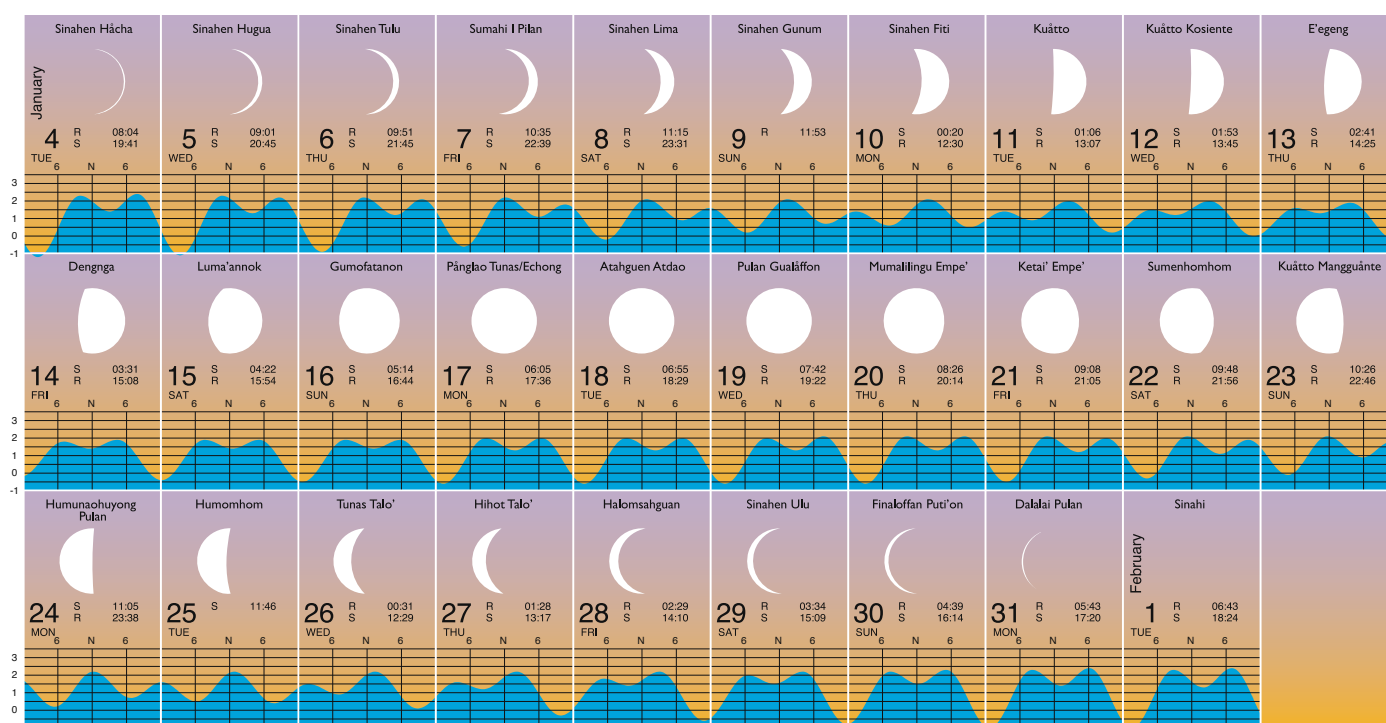
Evidence of an ancient Chamoru calendar indicates that the year was divided into 13 moon cycles (from crescent moon to full moon and back). This calendar is different than the Western calendar consisting of 12 months and connected to the solar year. Each month of the

Chamoru calendar highlighted activities related to fishing or farming. For example, fish activity is sensitive to the moon phase. Knowing the moon phase would help fishers know when certain fish were available to catch, where fish might be located, and when not to catch certain kinds of fish. The tenth month was known as "planting time," providing guidance to farmers about the best season to plant crops. This moon calendar continues to be used today by Chamoru fishers and farmers (**figure 19**).

The Chamoru language provides insights into how the Chamoru people used astronomy to support ocean voyaging. An ancient cave painting was found in Guam of a different kind of calendar based on the stars. The Chamoru had names for the stars, an indication of the stars' importance.

# Umayangan

*Ineru 4–Fibreru 1, 2022*



Moon-related Observations & Activities



Western Pacific Regional  
Fishery Management Council  
WPCouncil.org

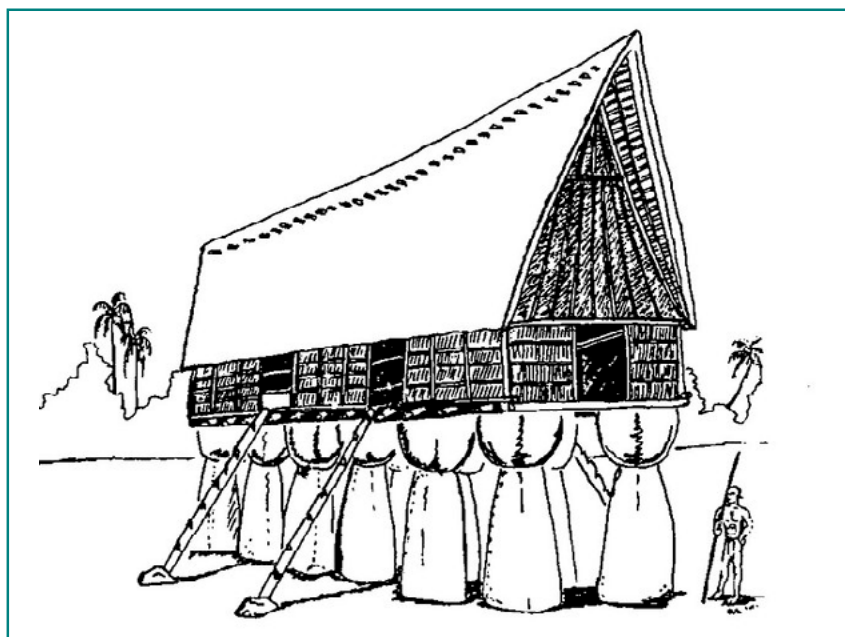
**Figure 19.** January 2022 13-moon lunar calendar. Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council diagrams.



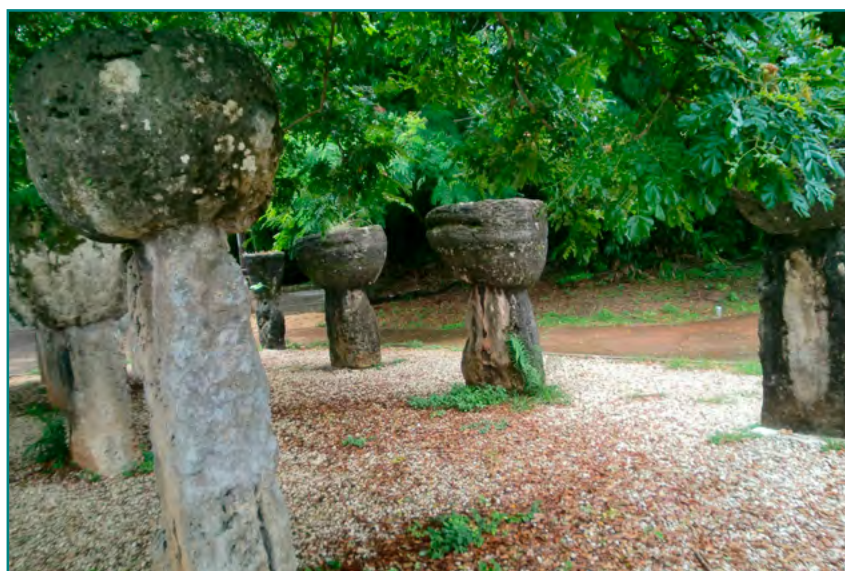
Some of the most **iconic** symbols of Chamoru culture are latte stones and latte houses. Latte stones are pillars with an inverted half-sphere of stone sitting on top. These stones, generally 4–7 feet high, were usually set out in four pairs, and a single-story thatched house was built on top (**figure 20**). The house was rectangular, built with poles and thatch, and had a steep

roof. The Chamoru first built these houses between 800 and 1200 years ago. The Chamoru stopped building latte houses about 300 years ago (**figure 21**).

The reasons the Chamoru used latte stone pillars are not known for sure. Some possible reasons include: (1) stone does not rot, and stone cannot be eaten by insects; (2) raising a house's floor can keep the floor dry while



**Figure 20.** A latte house. Image courtesy of Bess Press Publishing.



**Figure 21.** Latte stones are all that is left today of the Chamoru culture's ancient houses. Panoramio photo by Takemori Satoshi.

allowing air to circulate underneath, keeping the house cool; (3) a raised floor can provide protection from an attack; (4) the space underneath could be used as a workspace; (5) the two-piece pillar may have absorbed shocks from earthquakes; and (6) the cap's shape may have kept unwanted animals from entering the house. One thing we know for sure: Latte stones are important symbols of Chamoru culture.

The ancient Chamoru likely used fire in limited ways to manage agricultural lands, but today, fire in Guam has greatly expanded and is now a serious conservation problem. Human caused wildfires kill native species, degrade watersheds, reduce water quality,

and cause sediment to enter near shore areas where it covers and kills coral reefs. As in other tropical geographies, these wildfires also threaten the health and safety of human communities in Guam.

The USDA Forest Service has developed a wildfire awareness curriculum to help address the wildfire threat in Guam in partnership with: the Forestry and Soil Resources Division, Guam Department of Agriculture; the Guam Department of Education; the Pacific Fire Exchange; and the Center For Getting Things Started. This curriculum can be found at <https://www.pacificfireexchange.org/research-publications/wildfire-awareness-curriculum>.

## FACTivity



### Exploring Important Universal Values

**T**his FACTivity is taken from the Pacific Fire Exchange wildfire curriculum mentioned in the last paragraph of the essay. The curriculum includes information about some of the important values of Chamoru society. You will read about these values and hold a class discussion about how these values apply to your own life. The curriculum states that, "Values are the things that you believe are important in the way you live and work. They (should) determine your priorities, and, deep down, they're probably the measures you use to tell if your life is turning out the way you want it to."

#### Selected Chamoru Values:

**Inafa'maolek:** Harmony, to make good for everyone.

**Respetu:** You must have respect for yourself, for others, for our islands, ocean, and planet. The health of the environment is interconnected to many other issues.

**Taotao tano, Taotao tasi:** Interconnectedness. We are ONE. Realizing that we are one with the environment, with each other, and with the past and the future. Having this realization that all life is interconnected is powerful in changing our behaviors for the better of all.

**Māta:** Insight or Awareness. At a very young age, families teach children to be respectful when going into the forest or the ocean. The importance of one's ancestors and their influence and presence are emphasized. Children are taught to be aware and respectful of their environment and their ancestry.

Chamoru people use these values today to teach young people to be "future-makers" and not "future-takers." Discuss what you think those two terms mean and the following questions: How are the values above related to the idea of being a future-maker? Does your culture encourage these values? Give an example of how you have used (or can use) these values to be a future-maker.

**Discussion:** Scientists do not know for sure why Chamoru latte houses were built as they were. Recall that until 1668, the Chamoru culture was an oral culture. Discuss the possible relationship between not having a written language and the loss of cultural information. Discuss the importance of written language as well as the advantages of being an oral culture.

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## Web Resources



Guampedia: Archeology of the Marianas

<https://www.guampedia.com/historic-eras-of-guam/ancient-guam/archeology-of-the-marianas/>

Guampedia: About Guam

<http://guampedia.com/about-guam/>

Guampedia: Latte

<https://www.guampedia.com/latte/>

Guampedia: Ancient Chamoru Calendar

<https://www.guampedia.com/ancient-chamorro-calendar/>

Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council: Lunar Calendars

<https://www.wpcouncil.org/educational-resources/lunar-calendars/>

Stanford News: Indigenous language of Papua New Guinea

<https://news.stanford.edu/2018/08/30/stanford-phd-student-documents-indigenous-language-papua-new-guinea/>