

Spear Fishing

Feature 1

スピアフィッシング

祖先の暮らしを支えた海に今、再び潜る

Story by : Cindy Hanson Photo Provided by : James Borja



The Chamorros have always had a relationship with the sea that surrounds Guam. From use as a highway for proas sailing between the outer islands to a major source of food, the ocean has played a significant role in shaping Guam's culture and history. Yet despite its vast size, not all inhabitants of the island were allowed access to the ocean upon fear of death.

The ancient Chamorros' three-tier caste system forbade the lowest caste, the manachang, from even touching the ocean for fear they would spoil the fishing. Access to certain areas of the ocean was also controlled for the upper classes through matrilineal and family lines; violators often suffered the ultimate punishment. The fine for fishing in a private area or for the manachang, contaminating the ocean with their unclean touch, was death.

With lopsided rules preventing them access to the abundance of the sea, the manachang were relegated to fishing from Guam's rivers, where they used their hands, clubs, and wooden spears to catch freshwater eels, or asuli. However, while the manachang were not allowed to fish from the sea, all castes were allowed to fish with spears, a skill that contributed to the Spanish priest Juan Pobre de Zamora describing the Chamorros as the "most skilled fishermen ever to have been discovered," in 1602.

Originally, fishing spears, or fisga, were made from wood with tips carved from bones or wood. Once the Spanish introduced metal to the Chamorros, the tips were then replaced with metal ones and eventually, the entire spear was made from metal. The act of spearfishing was called ka'tokcha'.

The Chamorros used a variety of spearfishing methods to catch fish, from standing in shallow water to diving many fathoms beneath the surface of the sea. All spearfishing requires skill, but spearing from above the water took a lot of practice because sunlight affects the appearance of what is below the surface. If you throw directly at what you think you see, you are guaranteed to miss.



The spearfisher patiently waits for the unsuspecting fish to swim by before pulling the trigger and spearing some fresh catch for dinner.
水中でのスピアフィッシングの様子。現在は金属製の器材が使用されている。

Like firing a gun, the fisherman had to aim slightly lower than where the fish appeared to be in order to hit it. It took a lot of skill to perfect the technique.

The Chamorros also spearfished at night using a technique called *sulo'*, where a light is used to attract the fish. The ancient fishermen lit a bunch of dried coconut leaves to use as a torch where today a simple lantern is sufficient. *Sulo'* fishing was especially productive near the reefs where the Chamorros could see large parrotfish, or *palakse'*, asleep just beneath the surface in easy spearing distance. The best time of year to spear *palakse'* was between August and December.

The end of the year still remains the most popular season for spearfishing at night inside the reef and summer months are best for day spearfishing beyond the reef when the ocean is calmer, according to James Borja, a well known and avid spearfisher. "In general, Chamorros tend to stay away from the water at the end of the year, it's too rough," James said, "We were always discouraged from fishing during the holiday season because no one wants to attend a *matai* (funeral) at Christmas so instead we would go spearfishing inside the reef."

James Borja has been fishing for over thirty years, beginning with his father, who first taught him to fish with a hook, line and sinker at five years old. According to James, traditional spearfishing was done predominantly

inside the reefs along Guam's shores. "One reason spearfishing remained so popular was because Chamorro children were discouraged from learning to swim because the water could be so dangerous," said James, "If you can't swim, the safest place to spearfish is inside the reef."

However, spearfishing outside the reef in deeper water is also practiced in Guam, what the ancient Chamorros called *etokcha'*. Today, underwater spearfishing is done with a mask and usually fins and a snorkel, but the ancient Chamorros did not have those luxuries. They free dove, relying only on their eyes to guide them in the stinging salty sea. Though their ancestors were experts, spearfishing skills improved dramatically for the Chamorros with the introduction of underwater goggles by the Japanese.

Transitioning from waist-high water to the open ocean can be a daunting experience. James learned to dive over the reef off the shores of Gun Beach in Tumon and Jinapsan in the north, which is known for its very strong current. "The first time I went over the reef, it was a whole different world," said James, with a touch of awe in his voice. "It was massive; twenty feet looked like the abyss." And Guam's water gets much deeper.

"It can be deceiving," said Manny Duenas, "over the reef it drops to twenty feet and then it slopes to about sixty feet and drops again to over a hundred and then three hundred."

Manny Duenas has been a fisherman all his life and knows Guam's waters well. He is president of the Guam Fishermen's Cooperative Association (GFCA), a non-profit organization that represents the local fishing community. Manny began spearfishing as a youngster in Tumon Bay, before it was a marine preserve, and later in the challenging open water currents off Piti. "I used to spearfish all the time as a younger man, but now I leave it to James," Manny laughed.

According to both men, most local spearfishers free dive, holding their breath as opposed to speardiving with scuba tanks, which has become a controversial form of spearfishing in recent years. "If you use scuba tanks, you can dive deep, but you have a limited amount of time before you have to come up and spend time in the shallow water to decompress. Free diving means you can go straight down to deep water and come right back up. Look at James, he can dive really deep," said Manny, nodding his head at James, who humbly admitted being able



Illustration by
Andrew Gulac/UOG Art Student



Spear is generally made from human bone. But this spear is made from a long, spear-shaped upper jaw of Blue Marlin. Now they are sold as decoration. スピアは通常骨で作られることが多いが、これはブルーマーリンの、吻（ふん）と呼ばれる剣のように長い上顎の骨で作られている。現在は工芸品として販売されている。



These wooden spears are actually from Chuuk, but are an example of how ingenious the spearfishers are at adapting their tools for catching fish. These cages from Pohnpei are similar to what the ancient Chamorros would have used to catch eel. Photo provided by Guam Humanities Council. 古代チャモロ人はスピアフィッシングの他、さまざまな方法で漁を行った。左から金属が持ち込まれる前に作られていた木のスピア、鰻を捕るための仕掛け、50〜70メートルの水深に沈ませ魚を捕る籠。



to dive up to 40 feet and deeper.

Indeed, Guam's currents can be particularly treacherous and very dangerous for someone who is not used to them. Both men feel that local fishers develop a deep understanding of the ocean that surrounds them, learning how the currents and tides change throughout the year and using that knowledge to their advantage. "Back then, resources were limited," said James, "nowadays, we have the internet, charts, books, TV, all kinds of things to help us but we still use traditional ways."

"That's true," said Manny, "A good fisherman knows where to go; you have to understand the tides, currents, even the fish and animals. Like sea turtles, they swim along regular current paths that you can follow and use to navigate."

In what sounds like a peaceful way to provide fresh fish for yourself and your family, local spearfishing has become embroiled in controversy, with representatives from academia and the government attempting to regulate the industry. Last year, a bill was introduced to prohibit spearfishers from using of scuba tanks, stating the practice contributed to the decline in fish populations along Guam's reefs.

However, both men argue the decline in fish numbers is due to an increase in silt deposits caused by heavy run off during rain. There is some merit to this argument, as aerial images from the National Park Service clearly show that run off can stretch for miles along the coastline as well as extend outward in to the sea. The silt covers the reefs, suffocating the delicate corals that stimulate and support other life along the reef.

It might seem odd that the men would be opposed to the bill, as they agree most local spearfishers prefer to free dive anyway, but it is the principle, the tradition, and the local culture that fuel their contrary opinion. "Fishing is a way of life, you can't take away someone's means to take care of their family," said James, "Spearfishing isn't easy, you don't always hit the fish, which makes it the most selective method of fishing of all."

Manny agreed and said, "Fish has

always been an important part of our diet. If you compare the amount of fish that pre-contact Chamorros must have caught with what we catch now, it's nowhere near the same."

"Think about it, each person probably consumed about a pound of fish a day. The Spanish said the native population was about 20,000, that's 20,000 pounds of fish a day. Local fishermen don't catch 20,000 pounds of fish a day," said Manny. "Let's be conservative and cut that in half, we still don't catch 10,000 pounds a day. It would take us a week to catch what the ancient Chamorros probably caught in a day, so saying that fishing is depleting the stock just doesn't make any sense to me."

The accusation that overfishing has caused a decline in the resource does not sit well with local fishers because it is the antithesis of Chamorro culture, which teaches not to take more than you need. The sharing of food is also an important part of the Chamorro culture, as witnessed by regular fiestas and gatherings throughout the year. This tradition is carried on amongst fishers, who often share the day's catch with family and friends.

"Today, the new generation sees spearfishing more as a sport and there are a few, like James, who spearfish to bring something home to eat," said Manny, "James is a quick learner. I admire

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his skills. He can do everything; even throwing the talaya (fishing net) and night fishing. It takes a special skill to fish at night."

James appeared humbled by the older man's praise and it is clear he has a deep respect for the more experienced fisherman. "I never expected to be where I am," said James, referring to his level of skill, "I am fortunate to have gained knowledge from the best."

These two modest spearfishers make one wonder if the rumor that fishermen always tell tall tales is true, for these men seem very genuine and honest. "We fishermen have no shame, we will scold ourselves if we see something wrong," said Manny, which is probably true because they are also quick to praise where it is equally due.

If you would like to know more about Guam's local fishing community, contact the GFCA at 472-6323 or visit them at the Guam Fishermen's Co-op at the Paseo, located between the Chamorro Village and the Hagåtña Boat Basin. The GFCA also operates a small fish market that sells the local catch of the day and a variety of prepared dishes made with fresh fish and seafood. (The Co-op makes the most delicious fish kelaguen on Guam) Or you could make a new friend of the next local spearfisher you see and maybe learn to spear your own fish.

(Right) The Guam Spearfishing Team has won many medals over the years, many of them gold. (Below) The Guam Team shows off the catch that won them the gold medal at the 2010 Micronesian Games in Palau. 過去ミクロネシア・ゲームで獲得したグアムチームのメダルと、昨年の大会の様子。

スピアフィッシング、それは祖先が残したチャモロ伝統の文化

2010年パラオで開催されたスポーツ大会「ミクロネシア・ゲーム」。グアム、北マリアナ諸島、チューク、ヤップ、パラオなどミクロネシアの10の国と地域が参加し、野球や水泳など一般的なものからヤシの実を割る速さを競うなどユニークな競技に選手たちが日頃の練習の成果を発揮しました。グアムの人々の印象に残ったのは「スピアフィッシング」という競技。祖先が彼らに残したフィッシング文化が今日スポーツ競技として継承され、金メダルを手にしたのです。マリアナズ・アンダーウォーター・フィッシング・フェデレーションの代表を務め、マネージャーとしてチームを優勝に導いたジェームス・ポーハ氏はこの勝利についてこう語ります。「フィッシングは私たちの文化を語る上で欠かせないもの。その中で巧みな技術を要するスピアフィッシングには特に誇りを感じている。私たちが優勝することにより祖先の海に対する敬意が後世に残せれば、この優勝はとても有意義なものになると思う」。



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