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Colonialism in a Can

The film “Part III: Decolonizing Guam’s Diet,” in the AJ+ Untold America Series, focuses on the colonization of Guam by the United States and the inseparable relationship between food sovereignty and political sovereignty. The U.S through her overt actions (taking of land, establishing new regimes through government, etc.) and the ripples caused by these easily identifiable historical events (change in diet, shift in jobs, etc.) managed to dramatically alter the traditional lifestyles of the Chamorro and the trajectory of Guam’s health as a territory. The United States perverts the idea of freedom and paints herself as a savior who suggests that the Chamorro should be as grateful to her as they are to the embodiment of such “benevolence” which is, in this case, SPAM.

In much of American history the notion of the United States being an empire has been diminished by “nationalist impulses to reproduce a typical “American” story” (Moon-Ho Jung 70). The dominant narrative in history is often the American or colonizer version and this manipulation of the truth appears most prominent in the Chamorro’s relationship to SPAM. In the film, history professor Anne Perez Hattori states, “there are Chamorros who view SPAM very emotionally. When they see a can of SPAM they’ll get choked up. It reminds them of the marines and of freedom” (Al Jazeera 3:14-3:26). The American story revolves around America’s

depiction as the uplifter of the fallen, the defender of freedom and liberty, and in the case of Guam, the quite literal bringer of relief in a can. The sequence of video leading up to this quote follows an upward trajectory, from war torn Japan occupation of the island to the “salvation” brought by the United States, as a means to demonstrate how the U.S could appear as heroes despite the fact that they were simultaneously confiscating seventy percent of the Chamorro land (Al Jazeera). The film intentionally includes American-made propaganda that portrays marines, and the SPAM they bring, as incarnations of America and her lofty ideals of peace and freedom. Since the Guamanians were finally being fed, SPAM became a grand symbol of freedom that cast a shadow on reality and the people’s understanding of the correlation between the hunger they needed to be saved from and the absence of farmland that occurred due to U.S occupation.

The counter-narrative to America’s version of history explains the Chamorro’s current diet as one of the most evident consequences of imperialism, as the food they consume now is a product of the lifestyle that was forced upon them when they had to forfeit their lands and thus their sustenance. For Guam, as Francesca de Oro states, “[p]reserving our land and preserving our way of life is to protect ourselves and to protect our bodies”(Al Jazeera 1:32-1:35). The root of colonialism’s power is its ability to disconnect people from their cultures and thus remove them from the communities and history that they draw from for strength. As Smith argues in “Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy,” genocide anchors the white supremacist pillar of colonialism. Guam experienced a cultural genocide, a different kind of death, in which their way of life was massacred by the U.S to ensure and promote American capitalism and military security. U.S colonialism, achieved by committing genocide, has altered an entire generation’s interaction with food, the most basic aspect of any culture. As is shared in the video

by Shannon Balannon, “I didn’t like fish, I didn’t like coconut milk, because I didn’t grow up with it” (Al Jazeera 5:50-5:54). The Chamorro diet involves much more than simply eating food, but rather carries implications of a Chamorro connection to the Earth, and thus for a person’s tongue to not be accustomed to their traditional food is the epitome of colonialism destroying indigenous ways. Smith continues to define empire as “supreme and extensive political dominion; especially that exercised by an “emperor” or by a sovereign state over its dependencies” (70). We see clearly through this film that the U.S, in shifting the way in which the Chamorro provide for themselves, made Guam entirely dependent on imported American foods and forced the Chamorro to adapt to their colonizer’s way of life (and diet) as a means to survive.

The video purposely starts by following Hila’an San Nicolas as he engages in traditional spear fishing (a precise and thoughtful practice) so that when the realities of Guam are detailed later on the viewers see how a lifestyle of SPAM and fast food is opposite to the values their culture is built upon. Patricia Monture-Angus argues that “indigenous nationhood is not based on control of territory or land, but on relationship with and responsibility for land” (Smith 13). For the Chamorro, their commitment to the land was and still is above the physical, materialistic boundaries that the U.S brought with them, which is represented in the film by the repeated footage of fences and barbed wire imagery. As the young Chamorro couple describes, “everything we do is centered around that respect we have for nature. We revolve around nature, nature does not revolve around us.” (Al Jazeera 0:49-0:55). The video displays shots of the Chamorro’s traditional interaction with the land, through images of basket weaving and livestock in the backyards of people’s homes, to then intensify the contrast between the naturalness of their

previous, fading lifestyle with the artificiality of SPAM. The viewer's screen is flooded by the image of the nutritional label of SPAM in which words such as "emergency," "flavoring," and "sodium nitrite" are in a pronounced font, to exhibit how alien and unnatural this new dietary staple was. SPAM was a convenient solution to a problem the United States created in the first place and because of established reliance on cheap, processed foods Guamanians are bearing the consequences of colonialism at an individual level. Chamorros today are growing up with processed foods as substitutes for their culture, denying them the opportunity fulfill their responsibility to the land, and causing them to die at higher rates from cancer and diabetes.

The importance of this film lies in the contrast between the young Chamorro couple who now have the freedom to try and reclaim tradition and the elder Chamorro who still view SPAM as a gift. The interplay between the two generations, one living through liberation and the other living with the frustrations of being an American territory, exhibits exactly how conditions of war and suffering allow America to control whose story gets told. We analyze something as mundane as SPAM because its significance in Guam speaks tenfold about the degree to which colonizer's actions in the past impact the quality of life for the nations and peoples of today.

Works Cited

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