

‘Sweetening’ the Pentagon’s Deal in the Marianas: From Guam to Pagan グアムからパガン島へ マリアナ諸島基地作戦に色づけするペンタゴン

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One of the most tested and effective means of maintaining order in society is controlling the meanings of keywords and concepts. In his book, *Living in the Number One Country: Reflections of a Critic on American Empire*, Herbert Schiller observes that ‘definitional control’ serves “to bulwark, or at least minimize, threats to the prevailing order.”¹ In the context of contemporary Guam, control over concepts of patriotism toward the United States have hardly needed any coercion from the top of the political order as gratitude toward the U.S. military for ending the brutal wartime Japanese occupation of Guam, decades ago, has largely remained fixed in the memory of the indigenous Chamorro people.²

Nevertheless, these long-lived and largely uncontested concepts of gratitude are presently undergoing a reassessment in Guam generally and expressly among indigenous people. The present public battle over control of indigenous land rights has created another battle over the very words that might best represent the intentions of those in the U.S. military who seek to assert claims over sacred indigenous land.

The memory of (Ret.) General David Bice characterizing political leaders of Guam as targets for enticement in 2010 also remains fresh in the minds of people struggling to protect land, particularly sacred land, from what is widely felt to be unwarranted military expansion. The military’s push to maintain control took the form of an email [[full text](#)]

from Bice to concerned military organizations stating that the local community and its leaders must be divided in order for the Navy to get its way in securing sacred spaces for a new military firing range complex. In striking a tone of concern tempered by calm reassurance, Bice observed that

[g]roups opposing Marine relocation [from Okinawa] are successfully seizing on Pãgat as a means to gain legitimacy with public [*sic*—need to take the issue off the table to isolate them. We can get all of the land eventually, including a [surface danger zone] over Pãgat; we need to be patient and build trust with the community first.

Evident in Bice’s characterization of the issue are at least two flaws.

The first comes from what seems to be a profound and troubling ignorance of the significance surrounding the Pãgat “issue.” The historical and cultural importance of Pãgat Village dates back 900 years or more and provides a concrete way for any visitor to Guam to see first-hand the remnants of a complex Chamorro narrative that developed before, during, and after contact with the Spanish. Archaeologists and historians have uncovered evidence that supports the local belief that Pãgat Village is the resting place for the bodies and spirits of their ancestors. Bound to

indigenous beliefs and stories about life and death were routes of access to fresh water, a principal and pragmatic reason why ancient Chamorros were able to settle in the area. Pãgat Village is located over Guam’s aquifer, which provides drinking water for 85% of Guam’s population.



Pagat

The proposed location of a firing range complex over an indigenous village and burial site in addition to the potential adverse impacts on the island’s largest water resource were ample reasons to oppose Department of Defense (DoD) plans. But the community opposition was also rooted in a deeper, shared belief that DoD had simply sunk into greed. Most Chamorro families on Guam have personally witnessed DoD taking their land and converting these stolen tracts into airfields, roadways, and ammunition storage facilities. Stories also still abound about taking indigenous lands and turning them into beach resorts, golf courses, and McDonald’s restaurants. Shortly after the close of WWII, DoD annexed Fena Lake, another major ancient Chamorro settlement and source of fresh water in order to secure its own water source for military personnel. As a distressing spectacle of irony, DoD now sells the water from Fena Lake back to the government of Guam. Whereas Bice and his

cohort have attempted to cast the “Pãgat issue” as solely being about access to a tiny area it called “Pãgat Village,” the community has viewed this as a blatant DoD attempt to take more land and externalize the negative impacts to the local populace outside the boundaries of the barbed-wire fence.

Notwithstanding the cultural significance of the natural environment with its priceless resource of fresh water, the location of Pãgat itself and the artifacts unearthed there in earlier excavations suggest that the area was at one time awash with trading activity and part of a large network of cultural exchange. To historians, the site represents extremely fertile ground for continued studies in Western colonial activities and the mark these leave on the cultures and landscapes they subsume.



The second flaw is really the subtext of Bice’s sketch of the growing opposition that Navy officials are now facing. By casting local lawmakers in Guam as mere children who could be deftly bought off with some lucrative political deals, the content of the email typifies a remarkable underestimation of the reasoning power of common citizens. Much of the control over ideas about, and definitions of, key people whose consent was, and still is, necessary for the Navy’s expansion plans, slipped away when Bice’s email message was leaked to the wider public. His suggestion that the DoD would need to offer local leaders (i.e. Guam’s legislature)

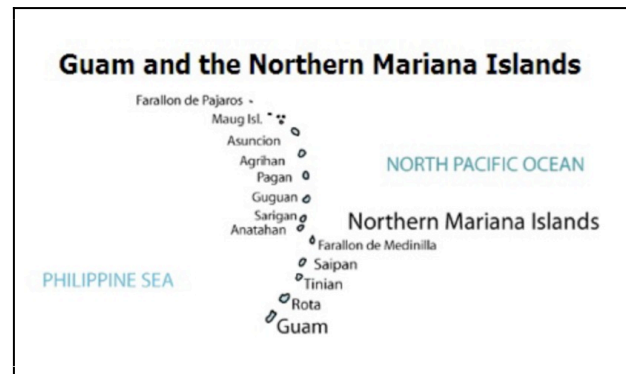
“sweeteners”³ so as to gain their support has hardly been sweet for the wider populace of Guam—where the community already contends with military forces occupying nearly 30% of the surface areas.⁴

On Guam, and throughout the Mariana Islands, DoD has hitherto largely avoided criticism for the vast areas of land, ocean, and air it has long appropriated for military training exercises. This is in no small part because, in many tight-knit communities across the region, DoD has had its own provincial champions—the local businesspeople and politicians who directly profit from military construction projects and environmental “mitigation” measures. This privileged group of local collaborators represents one front of DoD’s two-pronged campaign to expand the scope of the military in the face of resistance from civil society. The second front, in the face of warnings of environmental destruction, is the strong media insistence that failure to give DoD *carte blanche* control will spell economic ruin for the region.

Despite the widespread opposition of historic preservation organizations, both local and national, the DoD campaign won approval of a key document known as a “Programmatic Agreement.” This enabled DoD to conjure up the illusion that the controversy surrounding “Pågat Village” was actually “off the table” and would no longer be part of its plans for a vast firing range complex. Local media, in turn, have avoided challenging DoD’s attempt to redistrict indigenous lands, choosing, rather, to focus on the millions of dollars that could be generated from leases and the potential benefits of swapping ancestral lands for “valuable” properties ready for commercial development.

As stories of “sweet” deals for local people flood various media, the real prospect of economic ruin and its close connection to widespread environmental degradation has not

been lost on the larger population. Some members of the local community have maintained deep skepticism about DoD attempts to present the issue as one of simple access to Pågat Village, while various grassroots organizations have tried to keep the public focused on the broader issues associated with the attempted land grab.



Recently, the unwarranted expansion of military ownership of indigenous lands is threatening to spread to the Northern Mariana Islands. Again, as Bice had intimated in his original email, taking the issue of Pågat “off the table” will “isolate” those trying to save this culturally valuable ancient site even while it appears that the size of DoD’s appetite is growing and it seeks to extend its reach from Guam to other parts of the Marianas.

In March 2013, the DoD announced expanded plans that will effectively convert two-thirds of Tinian into a large-scale military training complex. DoD has maintained a lease on these lands for decades, but has let the lands sit abandoned, much to the chagrin of the local community. Officials also revealed their intentions to transform the entire island of Pagan into a sprawling military training complex.

If these plans are allowed to unfold, one-third of Guam, two-thirds of Tinian, and the entire islands of Farallon de Medinilla and Pagan (pictured below) would fall under the control of the U.S. Department of Defense.



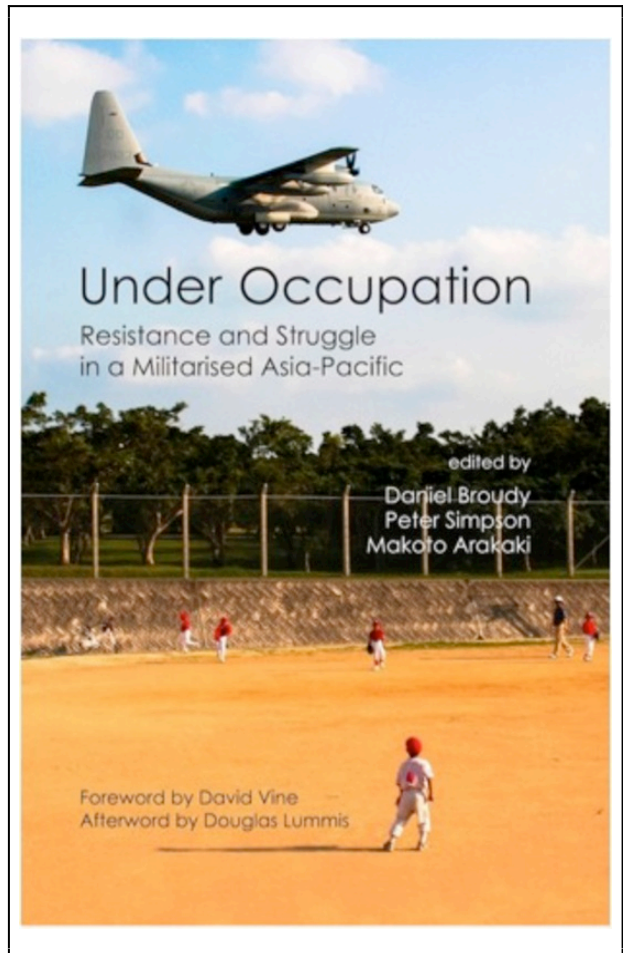
Photo Credit: David Sischo, Researcher. Kewalo Marine Lab Honolulu, HI.

The present plans to annex Pagan would result in the permanent displacement of hundreds of indigenous families who were evacuated after a volcano on the island erupted in 1983. These families have been waiting for three decades for the local government to allow them to return to their homeland. Of course, none of these people could have imagined that their inability to return home would create such a golden opportunity for DoD officials to portray Pagan as having “no permanent inhabitants.”

As David Vine observes in his study of Diego Garcia, DoD efforts to control the definition of a people’s status is part and parcel of a much larger U.S. effort to exercise “control over other nations and peoples not primarily through colonies but through its base network and a range of other military, economic, and political tools.”⁵ Correspondingly, Pagan’s present lack of “permanent inhabitants,” in such a remote and, thus, invisible region ⁶, has been a critical component of DoD’s conclusion that Pagan was the *only* suitable site for combined-level training, replete with enough practice space for coordinated amphibious and aerial assaults. In an attempt to pitch the plans to the local community, DoD has attempted to recast the indigenous people of Pagan as

permanent transients—inhabitants with no habitat.

Some have compared these designs for Pagan with those drawn up in Vieques, Puerto Rico in the 1940’s. The comparison underscores the wider practice and history of making military designs and imposing them upon civil societies that had no hand in their creation. Observers of this trend note that it’s no coincidence that Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands are all U.S. “possessions,” with no voting representation in the U.S. Congress and no means of participating in other cherished hallmarks of representative democracy. When people feel entirely possessed by distant centers of power, as in Guam, they may feel all the more motivated to challenge the legal and moral bases that purport to justify possessions of this magnitude.



Kyle Kajihiro pointedly observes that, at times, “the large countries have cooperated to impose imperial (dis)order, drowning local and indigenous cultures and economies under a rising tide of ‘progress.’”⁷ When land, water, and air all become objects of the military’s sense of progress, what will be left to protect? Furthermore, who in society should be most engaged in working out the meanings of the most significant terms and concepts? The military or the populace? The authors of *Under Occupation: Resistance and Struggle in a Militarised Asia-Pacific* seek and entertain various answers to questions like these.

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Notes

¹ Herbert Schiller, *Living in the Number One Country: Reflections of a Critic on American Empire* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2000), 152.

² Miyume Tanji, “Japanese Wartime Occupation, War Reparation and Guam’s Chamorro Self-Determination,” in *Under Occupation: Resistance and Struggle in a Militarised Asia-Pacific*, eds. Daniel Broudy, Peter Simpson, and Makoto Arakaki. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 161.

³ Read the full email from David Bice [here](#)

⁴ Catherine Lutz, “US Military Bases on Guam in Global Perspective,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 30-3-10, July 26, 2010.

⁵ David Vine, *Island of Shame: The Secret History of the U.S. Military Base on Diego Garcia*, (Princeton University Press, 2011), 190.

⁶ Engseng Ho, “Empire through Diasporic Eyes: A View from the Other Boat,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 2004, 46(2) 210-246, 232

⁷ Kyle Kajihiro, “Moananuiākea or ‘American Lake’? Contested Histories of the US ‘Pacific Pivot’,” in *Under Occupation: Resistance and Struggle in a Militarised Asia-Pacific*, eds. Daniel Broudy, Peter Simpson, and Makoto Arakaki. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 127.

Leevin Camacho is a contributor and **Daniel Broudy** is a co-editor to *Under Occupation: Resistance and Struggle in a Militarised Asia-Pacific*.

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