

The Impact of Relative Poverty on the Social Relations among the Chamorro in Guam: A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

This study explored the impact of relative poverty in the participation of Chamorros in Chamorro-organized social events in Guam. The subjects interviewed, reluctantly admitted to the lack of money to contribute in common Chamorro celebrations. The theoretical applications encompassed Merton's cultural strain theory and Goffman's dramaturgical model of social life. Chamorros' core value inafa'maolek (interdependence), and its incorporated chenchule' principle of exchange of gifts, were followed by all the participating subjects (n=11). The shared Chamorro identity demanded compliance with 'frontstage' behavior.

Keywords: chenchule', family, shame, respect, contribution.

Relative Poverty and the Social Relations among the Chamorro in Guam: A Qualitative Analysis

Guam is an unincorporated territory of the United States, situated in the Pacific, and home to the Chamorros, the indigenous population. According to Bevacqua, "The Chamorros of the Mariana Islands, of which Guam is the largest and southernmost island, have the dubious distinction of being the first Pacific Islander people to be colonized by Europeans and one of the last to remain formally colonized" (2016, p.75). Nevertheless, Guam is experiencing a revival of its Chamorro heritage. According to Marsh & Taitano (2015), all sectors of Guam's community continue to strengthen indigenous Chamorro culture and identity. Since some Chamorros are trying to move away from a colonized identity, it struck me when I talked last year to a Chamorro friend whose son was about to get married. I realized that she was at a crossroads regarding whether to attend or not her son's wedding; the lack of money to contribute made her feel like she could not show her face there. This was, according to my friend, not the first time that she would have had to miss an important social event due to monetary constraints.

Isbister (2006) explains that relative poverty are conditions of deprivation relative to others who are better off and are not necessarily life threatening. This approach to poverty apparently assumes that individuals compare themselves in a market economy. In a caste system, like the one ancient Chamorros had, the ascribed status was not in dispute. The strict hierarchical order was maintained through tradition among which chenchule', Rogers (1995) explained, allowed for the exchange of services and gifts among unrelated individuals. On one hand, we have among the Chamorros the core value of inafa'maolek, or interdependence, which encompasses the principle of chenchule', while on the other hand, my Chamorro friend was undergoing duress and was alone with her problem. Inafa'maolek is one of the core values among the Chamorro, and presents "interdependence within the extended family, a concept of mutuality and togetherness . . . [which] underlies all social relations" (Alexander, 2013). This interdependence was especially significant for the Chamorro while living in a subsistence economy. Yet, as the United States took possession of Guam at the end of the 19th century, it subsequently imposed a cash economy. This possibly modified the principles, like inafa'maolek, that maintained the cohesion among the Chamorro people. Consequently, the possible relative poverty limits access to not only material but also to human capital. There is no doubt that the implications of being unable to attend the son's wedding would have had at least an impact on the relationship of the mother and her son. Thus, exploring to what extent people lose social and familial relationships due to relative poverty in a Chamorro context, it is important. Since contemporary research literature seems to lack information about this topic, the aim of this paper is to establish a humble baseline and raise awareness about the phenomenon.

The fundamental question of this paper is whether relative poverty erodes social relations among the Chamorros in Guam. In an online poll conducted by the Guam Pacific Daily Newspaper in 2015, eighty-eight percent of the 452 participating readers responded “Yes” to the question “is the average Guam resident getting poorer?” (Web).

Literature Review

Owen said that due to its central position in the Eastern and Western trade zones, Guam became a historical water crossroads and a place for interaction between the Chamorros and the arriving peoples (2010). Among those who arrived and stayed are the Americans. Torsch noted that “during more than a century of American presence and influence, the Chamorros have experienced changes throughout their social, political, and economic structures” (2007, p.84). Notably, the financial situation attaches implications for the individuals in society; others measure social position “by specific indicators and symbols statuses, such as housing, occupation, how to talk, how to dress etc. All statuses that have similar characteristics constitute a distinct social stratification, a community where there is a sense of shared identity” (Chipea, 2015, p.183). This is seemingly contrasting the ancient Chamorro caste system where status was ascribed. In a class system people realize that the identity of the group is based on meritocracy. However, the “problem with meritocracy is that it endorses a competitive, linear, hierarchical system in which by definition people must be left behind. The top cannot exist without the bottom”. (Littler, 2013,p.54). Thusly, it is in this competitive context that cooperation, interdependence and the cultural identity of the Chamorro, might be affected.

Methodology

If the Chamorros who perceive themselves as living in relative poverty are not able to participate in the Chamorro social events due to the lack of money, then the principle of interdependence is threatened. In order to investigate this, I conducted interviews to test my hypothesis: the lack of money restricts Chamorros’ participation in Chamorro organized social events. In this study, by social life or social events, I refer to Chamorro events like weddings, baby showers, baptisms, birthdays, fiestas, family reunions, fundraisers, funerals, and rosaries.

Thusly, research questions are:

- 1) Do Chamorros feel that their social life with other Chamorro is affected by the lack of money?
- 2) If so, do Chamorros refrain from those social events in such cases?

From a theoretical perspective, the symbolic interactionist approach of Erving Goffman seems appropriate to the maintenance of cultural features, including Chamorro. In the Dramaturgical Model of Social Life, Goffman explains that in the theater of social encounters, there are a front and a backstage region. On the front stage, people “are expected to maintain a consistent social face and to help others in maintaining theirs”. Goffman clarifies that embarrassment “occurs when one’s claims to present a certain self are conflicted by the situation” (quoted in Collins & Makowsky, 2010). This theory will be used to answer the first research question. As a sub-theory, Robert Merton’s strain theory seems to fit the purpose of explaining responses to the question “Do Chamorro refrain from social events when they have no money?”. Merton argued that individuals find alternative modes of adaptation within a society or group. Merton (1938) further explained: The occasional sacrifices involved in institutionalized conduct must be compensated by socialized rewards. The distribution of statuses and roles through competition must be so organized that positive incentives for conformity to roles and adherence to status obligations are provided for every position within the distributive order. Aberrant conduct, therefore, may be viewed as a symptom of dissociation between culturally defined aspirations and socially structured means (674). Given that the purpose of this study was to explore to what extent Chamorro lose social and familial relationships due to relative poverty; a cross-sectional, qualitative study was conducted. My primary source of data are 11 semi-structured interviews conducted among Chamorro students (n=11) on campus of the University of Guam (UOG). Five males and six females were selected in a convenience sampling and asked to participate in an interview. This was done by asking the passersby around the RFK library located on UOG’s campus. Subjects were asked to participate in this study after they had confirmed that they were Chamorro. The ages of the participants range from 19-38. The interviews were conducted in a conference room or quiet hallway of the UOG library, depending on the desire of the interviewee and availability of space. The respondents’ names were substituted by a number, assigned consecutively as they were interviewed (1 through 11). Namely, the interview schedule consisted of eighteen questions of which four were demographic assessment. Since the interview was semi-structured, the guiding questions were as follows: Are you happy with your social life?

Do you feel that you socialize enough? Do you participate in events organized by Chamorro? For example, birthdays, fiestas, rosaries, fundraisers, weddings, baby showers, baptisms, etc. Is there anything that you can blame for the lack of quantity or quality in your social life? Do the events organized by Chamorro require material contributions? If so, what type? Money, gifts? Have you experienced money problems and were unable to attend any of those events? If yes, how often? How do, to your knowledge, Chamorro react if you do not contribute? How does it make you feel if you have no money to contribute? Do you use the "I'm a student" to get out of the material contribution? if so, how often? Have you ever felt ashamed or made your family feel ashamed because of the lack of material contribution? Financially speaking, how do you see yourself compared to others of your age? How do you finance your studies? What is your family's income range? How many times have you been invited to events organized by Chamorro in the last 12 months? Were you able to attend them all? Once the raw data was obtained, data was transcribed. I applied a narrative content analysis. In order to answer the research questions, I was looking for deductive themes addressing the variables. Additionally, I recorded the unexpected responses like keywords and phrases. The focused coding generated five themes grouped into two categories, while the open coding produced nine themes and three categories. The independent variable was the money while the dependent was the participation in Chamorro organized events. Although efforts were made to present a meaningful exploratory study, it also has its limitations. For example, almost half of Americans in the age group 18-29 thinks that it will be rich but statistics show that only about 5 percent of the American households earned more than \$150,000 (Athreya & Romero, 2015). Thus, the perception of mobility in the economic sphere among the younger students might distort their perception of what constitutes relative poverty. Another limitation could possibly arise from the fact that I, the interviewer, am a middle-aged, white female, and elicit responses different from the interviewers closer to the respondents' age group and ethnicity. Furthermore, as the topic could possibly generate feelings of uneasiness, interviewees had possibly limited the amount of information shared. Lastly, due to the lack of resources and time, the sample size of this exploratory study is very limited. Nevertheless, the range of the respondents' answers is narrow enough to provide insight into the Chamorro students' perception of the importance of money in the participation in Chamorro organized events.

Results

The selection of subjects and the consequent interviews were conducted from April 3 to April 14, 2017. All the subjects self-identified as of Chamorro ethnicity and residents of Guam. Since the target population was students, most subjects were around the age of 21 with only three students being over the age of thirty. It was important to recruit older students to make a comparison between the age groups in regards to attitudes toward the topic. It was not difficult to find subjects who were both Chamorro and willing to participate in semi-structured interviews around the UOG campus. In fact, the targeted population was entirely selected while heading to the main library (RFK), when they were presumably not in a hurry to a class (as it would had been the case around the lecture buildings). However, as I mentioned earlier, the interviewees were either reluctant to talk openly or much about money matters, so the original targeted number of interviews (six), had to be increased to eleven (n=11) in order to gain a clearer idea about the topic, test the hypothesis, and answer the research questions. The eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted in the library's building; only four interviews were conducted in a conference room (because of their limited availability), while the other seven took place in a quiet hallway where a desk and two chairs were available. I offered the subjects to choose where they want to seat, in order to make them feel that they are in control of the situation. Next, I proceeded to explain and present the consent form while I was reassuring the subjects that they were able to withdraw from the interview at any point and that anonymity would be preserved. I got permission from all the subjects to voice record the interview. These interviews lasted from 5-12 minutes which consisted of mostly closed ended questions with only a couple of them being open ended. However, probing questions were also used when needed. The process of focused coding produced five themes: "negative feeling about not contributing"; "subject did not attend event"; "contribution of service"; "subject directly blaming the lack of money"; "subject admits a poor financial situation". In the process of open coding, nine themes emerged: respect, gossip, *chenchule*, family and friends' distinction in contribution, empty-handed, family shall be supported, expected contribution, interdependence and food contribution.

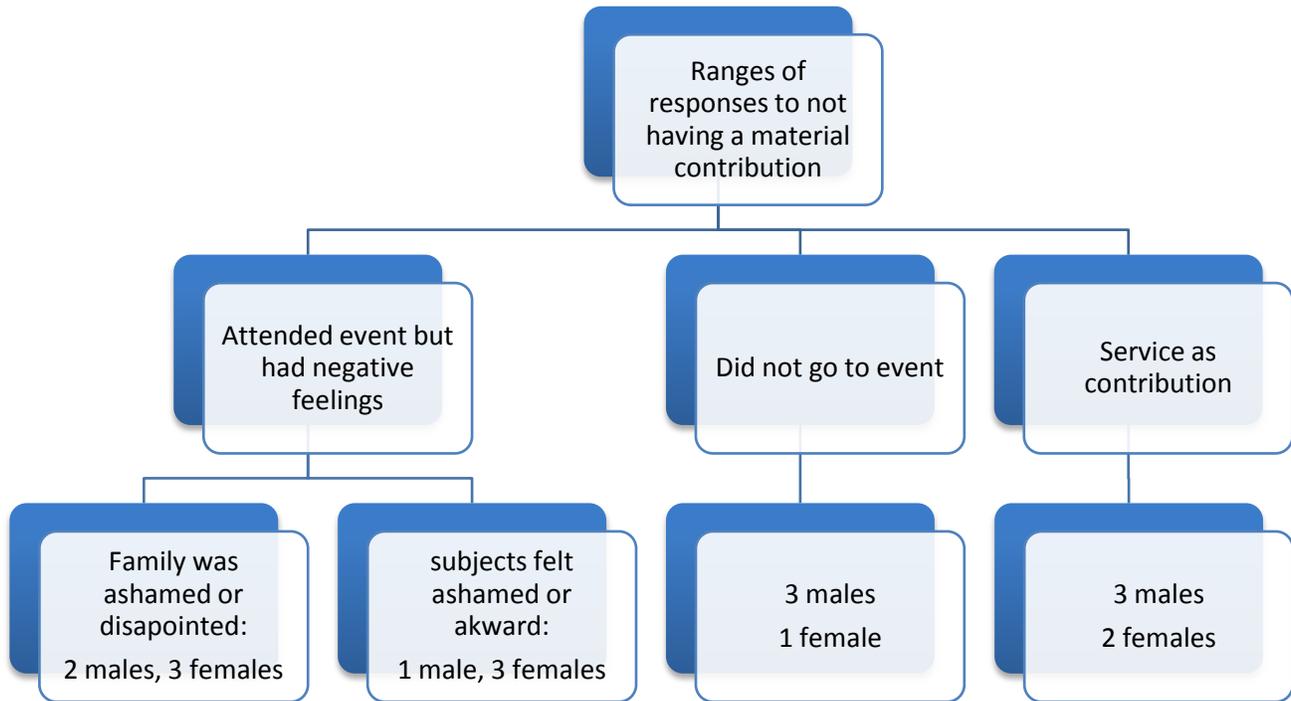


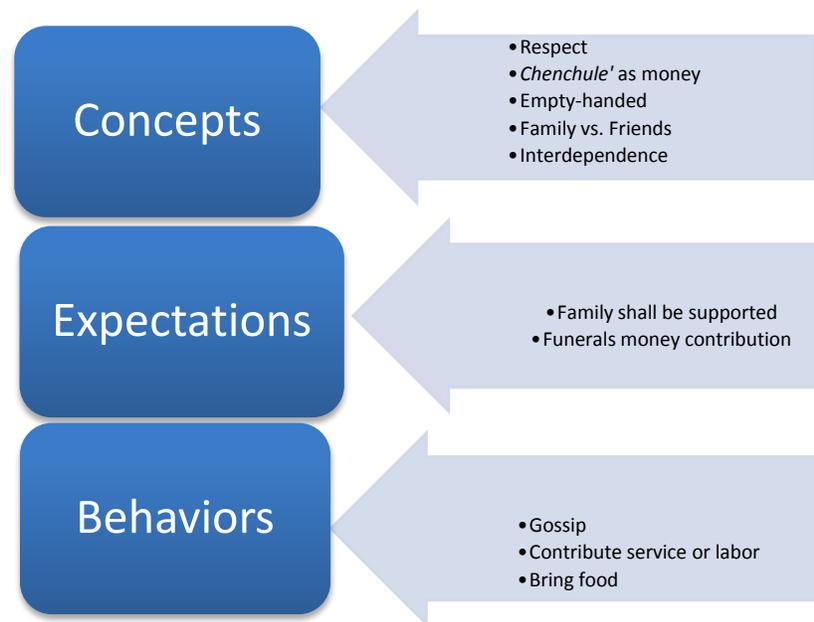
Figure 1. Focused coding category and themes

When it came to discussing negative feelings (see. Figure 1.) resulting from the inability to make a material contribution to a Chamorro event, five (n=5) indicated feeling shame themselves, (subjects #5, 6, 7, 9, and #11); four subjects (n=4), indicated that the family felt ashamed (subjects # 4, 9, 10, and # 11). Only one subject indicated that himself and the subject’s family felt ashamed to be unable to contribute (subject #11). Furthermore, subject # 11, and two more (subjects # 1and #9) have chosen not to attend the event if unable to contribute. On the other hand, 3 male subjects (#2, 3, and #4), and 2 females (#7, #8), decided to attend but to contribute to the event with a service or labor.

Figure 2. Focused coding category and themes



Figure 3. Open coding categories and themes



In the category “Money”, (refer to Figure 2), subjects #1 and #11 blamed the lack of money for the insufficient socializing. Additionally, subjects #1,4,8,9, and #11, declared being either poor, below average, or lower class, when speaking about their financial situation. In the open coding categories “Concepts”, results were as follow: three subjects used the word “respect”; ‘Loss of respect’ was addressed by subjects #4 and #7, while ‘out of respect’ was used by subject #8 (one male and two females around twenty years old). ‘Chenchule’ associated to money was expressed by 7 subjects (n=7) (subjects #4,5,7,8,9,10, and #11). The words ‘empty-handed’ or *tai mamâhlao* (shameless), were mentioned by three subjects (#4,8, and #9). There was a distinction between what and how much is contributed to family and friends in six subjects (#1, 2, 3, 6, 8, and #9). The concept of interdependence was expressed by two subjects (#2, and #8). In the category “Expectations”, subjects mentioned that either family should be supported or the family expects the strongest support from its members (#1, 2, 3, 6, 7, and #9). On the other hand, six subjects stated that money contributions were expected at funerals (#4, 5, 6, 8, 9, and #11). Lastly, in the category “Behaviors”, the results were the following: ‘Gossip as a common behavior after not contributing’ or “they’ll talk”, was mentioned by six subjects (#2, 4, 5, 7, 10, and #11). The contribution of service or labor was a behavior admitted by five subjects (#2, 3, 4, 7, and #8). Finally, bringing food to an event was something mentioned by subjects #3, 5, and #9.

Discussion

The subject #3 stated the following about money, “. . . we will say ‘I don’t have enough’ but not say ‘I don’t have any’”. This statement reflects the difficulty that posed to talk about money issues among the Chamorro, especially if they are in a vulnerable financial position. As Merkin explained, cultures with long-term orientation tend to emphasize the relationship instead of the accurate informational exchanges (2004). On the other hand, according to Goffman’s Dramaturgical Model of Social Life, like in a theater, social interactions differ in the front from the backstage. In the front stage, people use techniques to convey impressions, and at the same time, create their own self. It is possibly in this light, that the Chamorros indicated such a low concern with money matters when it comes to socializing with other Chamorros. Since in the front stage there must be a shared identity, if the subjects were assuming that other Chamorros participating have no similar financial problem, then they had to possibly redefine their self to fit the Chamorro identity. This would also confirm what Mokuau and Natividad (1998) said about ethnic identity and ethnic pride, that the “Chamorros have fought arduously to maintain *kustumbren Chamorro*” since the Chamorros encountered the first foreign powers (p.141). However, it is interesting that the only two subjects who admitted to the lack of money being a problem were males (one is 20 and the other 38 years old).

Given that two out of five male subjects in this study admitted that money interfered with their social life, it might be an indicator that in the market economy males feel more obligated to be providers, contrary to ancient Chamorro customs where both males and females had an important place in the subsistence economy. Additionally, three males and two out of 6 females expressed that their financial situation placed them at the poor, below average, or lower class level. Incidentally, the question numbers eight in the interview schedule, 'what kind of contributions is expected at Chamorro social events?' all the subjects answered that either money or food was required depending on the type of the event. Furthermore, everyone expressed that funerals required money donations. The most interesting remark made by most of the subjects (7 out of 11), was that *chenchule*' was money and not associated with services or gifts as Rogers (1995) stated. For example, subject # 8, a 19 years old female explained: Depending on what type of event it is! So, for example, rosary or funeral, I guess it's what's called traditionally *chenchule*', which is money to give to the family...I guess to show support. Even for parties, Chamorros don't like to come empty-handed. . . Out of respect, it doesn't matter if it's family or friends when contributing. Thus, there is a cultural expectation among Chamorros to show financial support 'out of respect'. As Merton (1938) explained, individuals within a culture-bearing society or group, show five possible modes of adaptation. If there are means to meet cultural goals, individuals conform. However, strain results if cultural goals cannot be met. Then, individuals might respond additionally with innovation, ritualism, *retreatism*, or rebellion (p.676). However, it must be noted that among Chamorros the individual is closely associated to its family. This is illustrated in the statement "My mother will always want to know how much I am giving or what I am putting out. When I give, or put out anything, I am inadvertently giving on behalf of my mother". This subject (#9, 35 years old female), is herself an adult, married, and has two children of her own. This certainly reveals that in the theater of social life (Goffman), Chamorro individuals are not just acting in the front stage for themselves but also for their families. Anyway, four subjects indicated that they had refrained from attending events due to the lack of money to donate or inability to purchase items for the event. In this case, *retreatism* was a way of coping with cultural expectations. This implies that my hypothesis 'the lack of money restricts Chamorros' participation in Chamorro organized social events' cannot be rejected. However, there was another way of coping with the cultural demands when attending Chamorro organized social events. Five subjects indicated that in the case of being unable to contribute with material things, they offered service or labor as a contribution. For example, subject #2 indicated that "If you don't have any material contributions, money or gifts, you can contribute by going and helping physically, like setting up, cooking the food, contribute in whatever is needed. There's clean up also, if there's no material contribution...in a form of labor".

Specifically, subject # 4 explained that ". . .you can contribute like helping out around the house. For example, the rosary, you go two hours before it starts and help them cook, set up..." Therefore, five out of eleven individuals occasionally engaged in what Merton called innovation, by adapting the available means to meet the cultural goals. The important implications that contributions have during rosaries among Chamorros was illustrated by De Frutos and De la Rosa: This is also the time to review the *chenchule*' and carefully to note down who contributed how much. These tabulations are entered into a notebook, and all the adults share the information since, just as they received the *ika*, they will have to 'religiously' return it. This reciprocity is rigorously observed; failure to observe it would mean expulsion from the system and would signal an enormous lack of respect (2012, p.469). It is evident that the pressure to 'perform' on the front stage during rosaries is high. Subject #11 explained the consequences in the case that the individual decided to retreat, or in other words, no show: "...if you don't go to rosaries, they won't go to yours, you must reciprocate. With *chenchule*' you must give back! They will talk about you, gossip..." Indeed, gossip was something that was commonly referred to when addressing Chamorro responses to the lack of contribution. Always accompanied by a giggle, six subjects responded to the question 'How would Chamorros react if there was no contribution?' that gossip with "basic gossip and loss of respect...because Chamorros know how to hold a grudge! . . ." (subject #4). Moreover, the concept respect was mentioned...by three subjects in two different contexts. For example, loss of respect followed the attendance of a guest who brought no contribution, while out of respect, people brought *chenchule*'. Subject #8 explained that "Out of respect, it doesn't matter if it's family or friends when contributing." Additionally, six subjects mentioned the difference or the lack thereof between family and friends when contributing. This close association points to the *inafa'maolek* principle as one of the Chamorro core values underlying all social relations, as mentioned by Alexander (2013). Subject #2 described the principle of interdependence (*inafa'maolek*) as "The point of gathering is to save money. If not, it becomes a lot! ...That supposed to be the whole point of that!". Nevertheless, the most important expectation expressed among the Chamorro subjects was that the family shall be supported.

Family gatherings always require some kind of donation (and usually it's more than one). For instance, during the recent Easter holiday celebration I spent about \$200 putting out something for the table. Not to mention I have two sides of the family to contribute to—my husbands and mine (subject # 9). In other words, “Family would be disappointed but friends...if you can or not...! [do not care much]. From family would always be expected more than friends” (subject#1). Merton explained that embarrassment arises when an individual is confronted about the self that it presents on stage but does not live up to the that image in reality. The feeling of shame was mentioned in the interviews by four subjects, regardless of the age. One of these statements expressed such feeling: “My whole family is there and I am not there and it's an important event like a wedding... If I don't go I feel ashamed”. In this case, subject #11 possibly feels ashamed that he was not behaving like family (a supportive member of it), since he did not attend the social event that he was invited to. Similarly, subject #9 expressed that “I feel a little *mamahlao* when I don't have anything to give or contribute. There are times when we help each other out in giving, meaning we combine our giving (money or donation)”. Lastly, subject #4 explained another instance where you have to perform some type of ritual in order to conform: “I am *tai mamahlao*, shameless, (giggles). You see it in parties, like they are sitting down, ‘come here to eat’, ‘oh, no, I'm fine’ and they ask like three times and then they go up, that's *mamahlao*. For some reason, it is a forced third ‘come eat’ and then go up”. Beforehand, guests were either informed to bring food and/or drinks, or were expected to not come empty-handed to the event.

As for my Chamorro friend mentioned in the introduction, she eventually decided to participate and contribute to the wedding by offering her services as decorator, thus, she was able to attend her son's wedding. Today, she appears more self-confident. Although we never went back to discuss her financial shortcomings, I noticed that she found both a sense of belonging and awareness that she can be a useful member of society. Anyhow, even when just two subjects admitted directly that the lack of money interfered with their social life, it is evident that Chamorro social relations are affected by the imposed cash economy. As Chamorro guests attempted to comply with their Chamorro customs of gifting, some of them failed to fulfil the cultural expectations and decided to withdraw from participation. Consequently, some Chamorro individuals are deprived of both material and social capital. Although not all of the subjects who manifested the occasional retreatism admitted to being relatively poor, it is implied that relative poverty did impact the Chamorro social relations. This, in turn, affected the core value of *inafa'maolek* or interdependence, and clearly exposed the principle of *chenchule'* as a principle tainted by the market economy. This also might be the way that aids in the transformation of collectivism into individualism. In order to preserve the collectivist value of interdependence in a Chamorro cultural revival context, it might be needed to revive the concept of *chenchule'* in a genuinely indigenous way. Perhaps emphasizing more in the Chamorro cultural education programs the impact of the *chenchule'* as money, instead of gifts or services, might raise awareness to the phenomenon and possibly cause the cessation of understanding interdependence and gifting as an exchange of money as tokens of good will. Lastly, since this study was conducted among University of Guam students, it would be recommended to offer and maintain a Chamorro Club where cultural exchange could take place, aiming especially to cater to students who feel that their social life is affected by the lack of money.

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