

'Piled in shoe boxes, shoved into a storage closet'

The long road to the reburial of Guam's ancient CHamoru remains

By Ron Rocky Coloma

For over a century, the ancient CHamoru remains on Guam have endured a tumultuous journey through varying states of neglect and preservation. Stored in boxes and paper bags, these invaluable cultural artifacts have faced the perils of inadequate storage conditions, multiple relocations and a lack of proper preservation efforts.

"The cold, hard truth is that the people who gifted us with indigenous knowledge, who blessed us with their genes, who acted as stewards of the island we inherited—many of them are piled in shoe boxes, shoved into a storage closet," said Vice Speaker Tina Muna Barnes, author of a bill appropriating \$5 million for the construction of a proper reburial site for the ancient remains.

Now, as Guam takes significant steps toward honoring and reburying these remains, State Historic Preservation Officer Patrick Lujan provided an update on their current condition, historical significance and the plans for their future.

The plight of these ancient remains highlights the broader challenges faced in preserving Guam's rich cultural heritage. With an estimated 3,000 sets of remains, each telling a story of the island's ancestral past, the effort to properly care for and eventually rebury them is both a logistical and moral imperative.

"Most of these remains have been unearthed for over a hundred years and are still in boxes and paper bags," Lujan said.

"They have been moved numerous times since they came under the responsibility of the Guam Museum. These are all ancient CHamoru remains, the majority coming from the Tumon Bay area,

which in ancient times was divided into several smaller villages," he added.

Currently, the remains are stored in a donated facility at the DNA Building in Hagatna. They were transferred there 20 years ago when the old Guam Museum in Tiyan, where the remains were previously housed, were damaged by Typhoons Chata'an and Pongsonga in 2002.

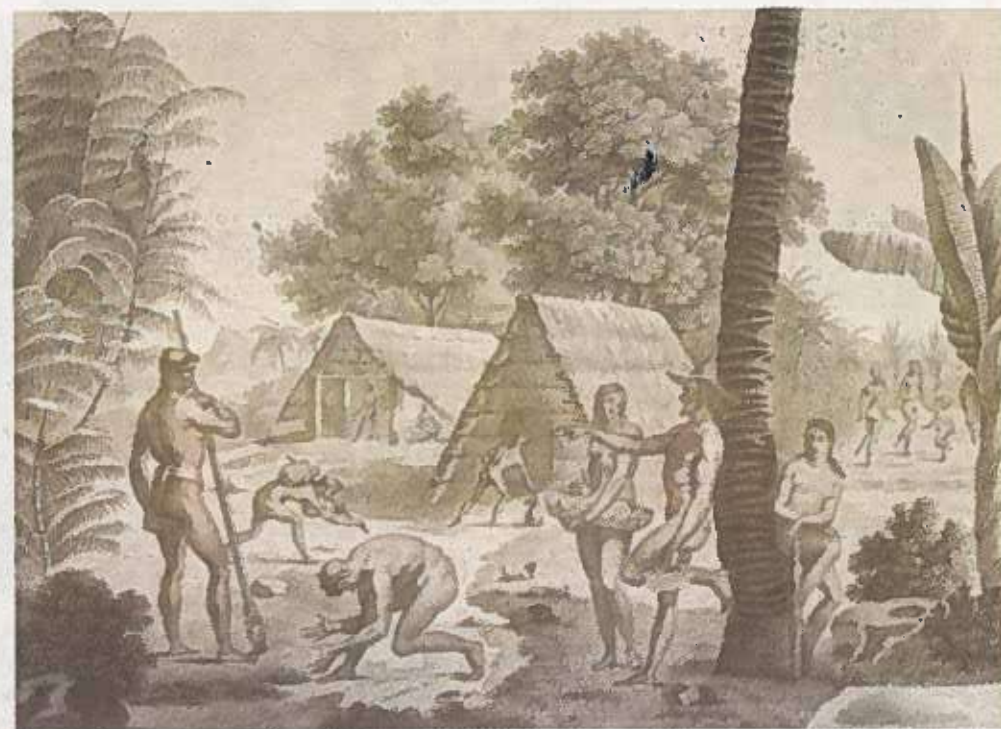
Plans are underway to move them temporarily to a new cultural repository at the University of Guam for a comprehensive inventory, pending construction of a permanent shrine that will be built in Tamuning.

The remains were discovered over several decades, with the earliest excavation dating back to the 1920s by Hans Hornbostel. Subsequent discoveries occurred post-World War II, with significant activity around 1989 following an executive order issued by Gov. Joseph Ada. This order mandated that newly found remains be kept in place or reburied near their discovery sites, leading to various reburial monuments across the island.

"The process has taken a long time due to financial constraints," Lujan said.

Legislative and executive efforts over the years have slowly advanced the project, with significant milestones in 2016 and 2018, when the site for the final resting place was identified and funding for architectural and engineering services was secured.

"The remains are not meant to be museum pieces," he said. "The mission of the museum is for the curation and showcasing of artifacts, not human remains. This responsibility falls under my



A village scene of the Ancient CHamoru illustrated by J.A. Pellion from Freycinet's *Voyage Autour de Monde*, Paris, 1824.

Photo courtesy of Guam Public Library System/Guampedia

"Would we be silent for decades, happily allowing the bones of great-grandparents to be unearthed and unburied? To me, the answer is clear: our government has taken too long to make good on this promise," Vice Speaker Tina Muna Barnes said.

office, which currently lacks the capability to manage them properly."

The remains are slated to be moved to the new Guam Museum in Hagåtña, with current efforts focusing on securing funding and developing a detailed inventory. "It's a huge project that's long overdue," Lujan said, emphasizing the importance of proper treatment and respect for these remains.

The main challenges lie in the logistics of preserving and reburying the remains. Community involvement is crucial, and Lujan calls for support from various stakeholders.

"It's morally right for our ancestors and culturally vital for our history," Lujan said. "These artifacts connect us to our roots and heritage. Preserving and reburying them honor our ancestors and strengthen our cultural identity."

Gov. Lou Leon Guerrero recently signed into law Bill 264-37, which appropriates \$5 million for the construction of the Naftan Mafina-ta Shrine, the reburial site for thousands of disinterred ancestral remains discovered in various sites throughout our island.

"This appropriation will enable our government to carry out the design painstakingly created by the inimitable late CHamoru architect, Andrew Laguna, complete a project our government first contemplated over three decades ago, and finally fulfill our promise and moral obligation to bury these sacred remains with the solemnity and dignity they deserve," the governor said.

The construction of Naftan Mafina-ta CHamoru National Shrine on Ypao Point in Tamuning was proposed three decades ago. However, the project has since been impeded by funding issues and subsequent clashes over the site.

Deploing the "inhumane and undignified" treatment of the remains, Barnes said restoring the ancient CHamorus' honor and the dignity by reburying them is long due. "Would we wait this long if it was our nana or tata in that shoebox? Would we be silent for decades, happily allowing the bones of great-grandparents to be unearthed and unburied? To me, the answer is clear: our government has taken too long to make good on this promise," she said.