



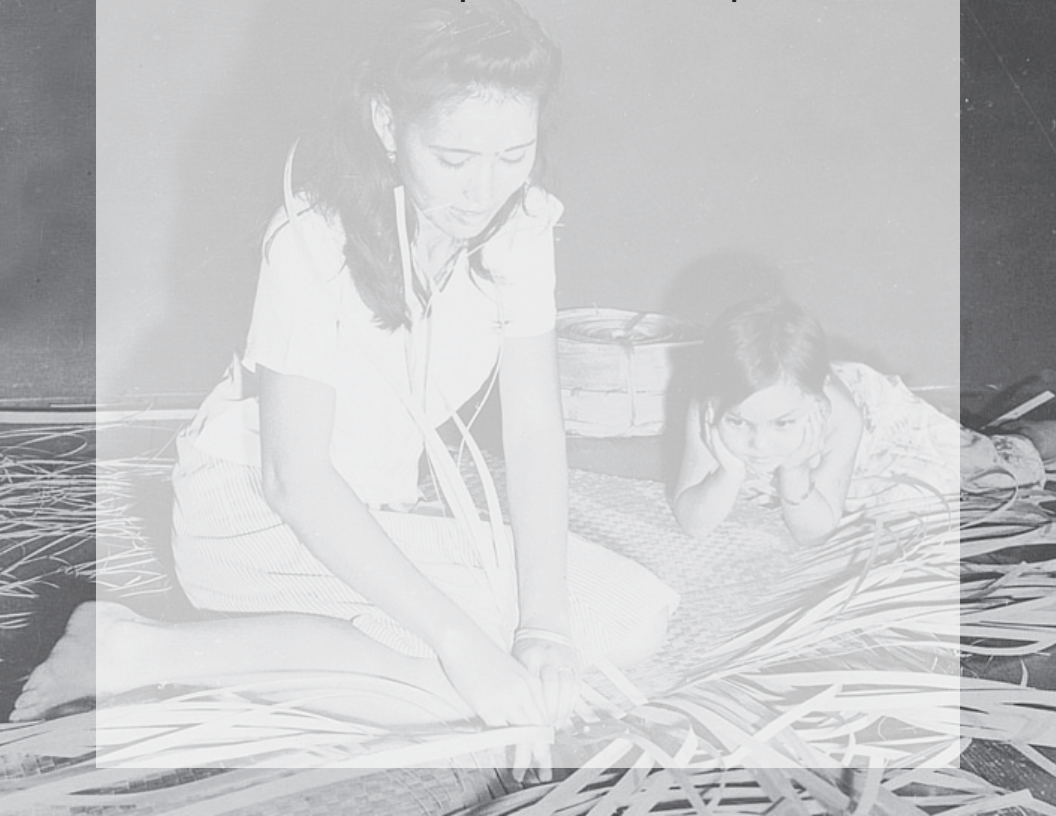
NORTHERN MARIANAS
HUMANITIES
COUNCIL

2025

MY MARIANAS

Writing Contest

A Collection of Winning Essays and
the Next Top Seven Runner-Ups



2025

MY MARIANAS

Writing Contest

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The Northern Marianas Humanities Council is a private, non-profit organization established in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands in 1991. Its mission is to navigate and explore the human experiences of the indigenous and diverse peoples of the Commonwealth by enriching their lives through research, publications, dialogue, and programs.

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NORTHERN MARIANAS
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Contents

TABLE OF CONTENTS

My Marianas Writing Contest	4
Acknowledgements	4
The Hands of Heritage	5
My Mixed Culture	8
A Fruit Platter	11
The Invisible Threads	14
Woven in Tradition	16
Inafa'maolek: The Stand of Our People	18
The Tradition Behind a Visit	20
Ingredients of Tradition	22
Tradition In Every Fold	24
Carried by Culture	26



MY MARIANAS *Writing Contest*

The My Marianas Writing Contest is a project conducted by the Northern Marianas Humanities Council to promote literacy and the diverse backgrounds and experiences of high school students.

The content of this publication features the winning essays and runner up contestant entries of the My Marianas Contest conducted in 2025. The contest launched on February 5, 2025 with a submission deadline of April 11, 2025. All CNMI high school students were invited to participate in the contest for a chance to win cash prizes and an opportunity to have their work published.

The Council received 39 personal narrative essays that addressed the theme: ***Threads of Tradition***. The theme encourages writers to explore how cultural values, customs, and traditions—the "threads" of heritage, family, and community—have shaped their identity.

Essay submission guidelines call for a double-spaced, 3-5 page personal narrative essay that demonstrates the skillful use of imagery in iterating the author's personal experience with a cultural value or practice that has withstood the test of time and persists through generations.

Acknowledgements

The Council wishes to acknowledge and thank all student contestants for making the effort to write an essay for this purpose and displaying the courage to share their personal experiences and stories. This would not have been possible without their teachers, friends, and family members who took the time to encourage and support their work. To ensure a disciplined approach to identifying the top essays, we enlisted the help of volunteer judges: Crystal Deleon Guerrero, Randee-Jo Barcinas-Mangloña, Olympia Sablan, Eulalia Villagomez, Alex Tudela, Jovannalyn Mafnas, Dr. Isa Arriola, Lynette Villagomez, and Thomas Mangloña III. We are grateful for their participation and commitment to ensuring that all eligible essays were carefully read and scored at least twice.

The Hands of Heritage

by Jireh Anna C. Cruz
Tinian Junior/Senior High School, 10th Grade

When people talk about tradition, they usually think about holidays, food, or ceremonies. But for me, tradition looks like a bottle of coconut oil and my dad gently pressing his thumb against a child's swollen eye. It looks like the way he'd sit calmly, speak softer, and distract them with stories while performing healing practices passed down to him from his mother—and my paternal grandmother—, Ana Pangelinan Cruz. What my dad did wasn't the least bit flashy. He didn't advertise it or ask for attention. The people who came to him—especially kids—knew they could trust him. He was more than just their Saina in their moments of need. That quiet kind of trust is something I continue to carry with me to this day.

I have watched and experienced my dad performing these massages many times. He had a way of making things feel normal, even if they weren't. People of all ages and varieties would come with all kinds of illnesses—including otidun (sty & pimple in the nose, eye, or ear), grānu matditu (boils), applying (sprains), che'tan (injury/pain in the back or joints), and general body aches. They would see my father either in the early morning or early evening consecutively for days, sometimes even weeks depending on severity & effectiveness. My father never charged them. He didn't ask for gifts of money. All he wanted in return was for them to understand that this was a gift meant to be shared. Not hoarded. Not sold. Jose (Gurak) Pangelinan Cruz taught that this gift was something passed on to people who needed it. That's what he believed healing was about—something you gave freely because *it was never really yours to keep*.

He often used coconut oil to massage his visitors. I remember how he would talk to people throughout the "session." Nothing too deep, just casual conversation to distract from the pressure he was applying. Sometimes, he'd make them laugh. Sometimes, he'd share a story of his own, or prompted one from them. Most of the time, he would pray for his patients. He believed his ability and unique thumb temperature came from the most high. But even when it hurt, they continued to give him their trust. They came back. Eventually, their ails would leave them, not just because of the physical technique, but because they felt cared for. Seen. Safe. It's a physiological thing about the connection between your body and mind.

My dad was a breech birth baby, meaning he was born feet first. In Chamorro culture, these births are a sign. People believe it means you were born to heal, and be an excellent masseur. It may sound like superstition to some, but in our family, it was something sacred. My grandma saw it right away. She started

using his hands to teach him to massage when he was just a baby as young as 6 months old—simple movements at first, and more advanced ones as he grew older. He used to tell me how his hands learned things before his brain could explain them. That always stuck with me. As he matured, he started developing his own techniques, building on his mother's teachings. It wasn't just tradition—it was evolution. His own contribution to something ancient.

He told me many times why he chose to continue this work. Part of it came from his deep faith in God. He believed that we all held the responsibility to protect people—even if they weren't technically ours to be responsible for. He believed sickness was something no one should ever have to suffer through alone. But the part that hits me the most was when he shared something beyond personal; my father was supposed to be born with a twin, but his brother was stillborn. My dad said he sometimes felt responsible for surviving despite his twin brother appearing to be a healthier baby than he did. That he owed it to his *dinga'* (twin) to live a life of meaning. Healing others is his way of paying that survival forward.

I've received messages like that from the legend himself too, although I don't remember every single one. What I do remember is how much I looked forward to those moments. I used to get *terrible* leg cramps—Charlie Horses—that left me in almost unbearable pain. He would have me lie down, and start pressing into the muscles of my leg, gently at first, then with more precision. Somehow, even when I didn't know exactly where the pain was coming from, he did. He'd pinpoint the exact spot and press in these little triangular patterns that I still use today whenever I get the chance. And like with the other kids, he'd make me laugh. Joke around. Pray for me. Turn something painful into something bearable and healing—both physically and emotionally.

There's something about touch—real, intentional touch—that stays with you. And even though I'm not a massage expert like he was, people have told me I have a similar touch. Strong, but kind. Grounded. My dad gave me that—not just the technique, but the energy behind it. And that energy is part of a much bigger picture.

Another part of that picture is the ocean. If massage was how my father healed people on land, the ocean was how he healed himself—and sometimes, us. He loved the ocean more than anything I can name. He believed it was sacred, alive, and filled with more life than we'd ever understand. After all, it is the ocean that sustained us and many before us long before we could understand it. We used to go out to the beach often, not even to swim sometimes, just to sit and admire it. He'd tell me stories about his prime fishing days, the ones where he'd catch something big enough to feed an army. You could tell from the way he spoke that the ocean was where he felt most at peace.

There was one time when I caught a bad case of pneumonia. Instead of giving me modern medicine and taking me directly to a hospital, my dad convinced my mom to take me to the northern beaches of Tinian in the early mornings. He

told me to breathe in the ocean air. We sat there for hours, and I remember how truly calm I felt. I don't think I will ever feel a peace like that anywhere else. I didn't take any pills. I didn't go through any surgical operations. I just sat with him, and *breathed*. Somehow, I got better.

He taught me how to move through the water with grace, but also with power. To fight her (Mother Nature), but not too hard. To respect her, and work with her. That mindset stayed with me. It's why I love movies about surfing, sailing, and anything that involves people learning to live in rhythm with nature. It's more than entertainment to me—it's reflection.

The week of my father's passing, he went to an aquarium for the very first time in his life. Sixty-four years old, and he was in awe like a little kid, watching fish, stingrays, and so many other creatures like they were miracles. I think about that moment a lot. How even at the end, he was still finding new ways to fall in love with the world.

That is the kind of love I want to carry forward. I plan to keep these traditions—these *beliefs*—alive by sharing them with people who will truly and wholeheartedly listen. Learn. Teach. I may not be the healer he was, but I've been told I'm a chiropractor in the making. And more than that, I hope to be someone others come to for safety, comfort, and clarity. I hope to be remembered the way my father was—someone who gave, even when it hurt. Someone who knew how to make people feel better, not just with hands, but with heart,

Tradition isn't always loud. It's not always something you wear or perform. Sometimes, it's quiet. A thumb applying pressure on an injury. A father helping his daughter learn to breathe through sickness. A man standing in awe in an aquarium. For me, tradition is healing, giving, and loving without expecting anything back. That's what my father taught me. And it's a thread I'll never stop holding onto.



My Mixed Culture

by Hailey Benavente
Kagman High School, 10th Grade

The smell of freshly made adobo fills the whole house, my Tata grilling meat on the barbeque in our yard, my Nanay setting out the steaming hot rice, blending with the laughter of my family gathered around the house. The sounds of clattering spoons against the plates and the “manamko” playing cards are joined with stories that go across our family’s generations. Praying before eating, thanking the Lord for all he has done. Moments like this, I realize how deeply my Filipino and Chamorro culture is rooted in my identity. Every tradition, every value, and every shared experience forms a connection between me and my ancestors, shaping the person I am today. These small, wholesome moments remind me that I belong to something greater than myself.

I used to think traditions in my culture were just routines or things like blessing our elders or praying before we eat and sleep, or even going to church just because my parents or grandparents told me to. But as I grew up, I began to see them for what they truly are. The invisible strings that connect me to my past tie up my present and guide me toward my future. Every tradition, big or small, Filipino or Chamorro, holds weight for me that shapes my values, my identity, and my understanding of what it means to be a person with mixed cultures and beliefs. Now, I realize these traditions are not just rules; they are my reminders of love and sacrifice.

One of the most explicit traditions of my Filipino and Chamorro identity is the strong belief in God, being there for family, and respect for one another. In my culture, family extends beyond an ocean’s reef; it includes grandparents, aunties, uncles, cousins, and even close family friends that are considered our “tita” and “tito” or our uncle and auntie too. Church is beyond important in my family. It was always a tradition to go to church every Sunday and every holiday, but on holidays we celebrate with a big fiesta. Lastly, respect is a really big thing in my family. We have to practice ways of showing respect, like blessing our aunties and uncles, or should I call them “tita” and “tito”? Other than that, we practice to love one another. Love is not just shown in words, but in actions too, through the food being put in front of me or the silent sacrifices they make for me, the unwavering support they give me that never fades, no matter the distance, and no matter how deep. Our family goes above and beyond to show our love for each other; no matter how much they do, they never fail.

I remember one particular time when my grandma from my mom’s side passed away from cancer. Our entire family came together. Extended family showed their love with shared meals and hosting the 9 days before her funeral. They all

came together and showed their support in one of the hardest times in my life. Before she passed, my mom and her siblings helped pay for her treatment. Our family would call her every day after my mom got home, making sure she would be happy. She would ask if her hair was falling out because of the treatment. My mom would always tell her, "Dalai, Mom, you only went to one chemo treatment; your hair's fine." She did anything to make her laugh to distract her from what she was going through. My grandpa stuck by her side the whole time before she left this world, but the thing is that no one asked for help; it was simply given. When I noticed this, I saw the true meaning of family and love, whether it was in silence or said by words, familia or not, we all know we loved one another.

Through this experience, I learned that love in our culture is not just an "I love you." It is about showing up, about being there even in the hardest moments. It is about the quiet ways we care for each other, the small gestures we do that speak volumes. This taught me how important it is to be there for each other, not just in the joyful times but in the times of struggle too. It shaped my sense of responsibility, reminding me that family is the foundation of strength.

In my Chamorro culture and family, the traditions have also shaped my life in a significant way. Whenever I would travel for soccer tournaments or even when I graduated from 8th grade, my Chamorro family came together to congratulate me. These things to me were just small achievements, but to our Chamorro culture, small achievements are viewed as a victory for my whole family. The party was filled with people who raised me, watched me grow, shared their thoughts, and supported me in infinite ways. It was more just a party; it's a coming together of people to celebrate life and one another. Not only that, going to church every Sunday helped me become closer to God. I love praying even if it's just before eating with family or praying for others; I look forward to Sunday masses every week. In these times, I felt loved and celebrated, not for what I did but for who I am. They remind me that I will never be alone.

For the past few years now, practicing these traditions of being there for family, respect, and praying has made me more disciplined and more soft-hearted. It made me value family more than I used to, since I was always a troublemaker, never cared for anyone's opinion, never wanted to go to church because it was so early in the morning, and always wanted to make my parents mad. But since my grandma passed and I saw how much my family cared for my mom, who was grieving, I began to realize how much family means to people, how much the Lord has touched their hearts, and how much respect they believe in.

As time goes on, these traditions will evolve in the future, but with the world changing so fast, who knows? Maybe church will be attended online, or maybe we will have to call our family for gatherings, and maybe respect will stay the same. Life will get busy in the future, and family members might have their own lives and problems, but no matter the change, how far, or how hard, these traditions will always have the same meaning behind them.

As I continue to grow older, I want to make sure I don't take my culture for granted. I want to pass these traditions on to the next generation, to be there for my family, to share meals, laughter, and prayers just as my family had done for me. I want to always show love through actions, just like my family has taught me, but most importantly, I want to continue strengthening my faith and staying connected to my roots. They are the things that make me who I am

I want to be the person who keeps our stories alive, the person who reminds the next generation of my family where we came from, and who we truly are. Even if the world changes every day, I will hold onto the silent powers of our values because my culture is not just about food, celebration, or money; it is about the way we are there for each other, in the way we forgive and show up. I have learned that our culture is not just passed down by blood, but through love.

In conclusion, I know that my Filipino and Chamorro culture will evolve in ways we can't control, but their values of faith, family, and respect will always remain in my heart, guiding me through all challenges life will throw at me and shaping the person I strive to be. No matter where life will take me, I will always carry my culture proudly with every prayer, every meal I share, and every way I give love. That is how I honor my ancestors, family, and myself.



A Fruit Platter

by Yu Rong Jiang
Saipan Southern High School, 10th Grade

"I'm sorry, I love you."

5 words my parents never told me, yet I knew that their love knew no bounds.

Growing up, I never understood why my fruits were cut up into uneven pieces, stained with garlic or ginger bits. My mother, telling me to "快快学习" (hurry, and study) in Mandarin, while putting down a platter of sliced fruits on the dining table I sat doing homework. At the time, I thought it was careless. A rush job. Like they couldn't bother rinsing the knife or cutting board before slicing apples, or washing their hands before peeling an orange meant just for me. I'd wrinkle my nose at the spicy tang clinging to the fruit, wondering why something meant to be sweet came with so many aftertastes. Oftentimes, I'd scrape off the first layer of fruit just to escape the weird traces of something else other than the fruit itself. Admittedly, I'd even throw out the ones I couldn't salvage. Over time, I realized, no matter how much I scraped, what's once contaminated will stay contaminated. All I could do was to make it taste less tangy, less salty—less of contamination and more of the pure fruit. Years went by of me eating garlic-stained apples or soy sauce flavored oranges that my parents prepared so, so gently.

Those years were where I drifted apart from my parents. The language barrier between us as they spoke perfect Mandarin while I spoke fluent English made the Chinese heritage in me complicated. Those years were also the ones where I had stuffed tissues stained with the surface layer of fruit somewhere out of sight from my parents, the same years where I'd grown to be able to peel my own oranges, slice my own apples. They were also the years when I'd wrap up the fruit pieces I didn't like from the platter with scratch paper, hiding them away so my parents wouldn't know I'd thrown them into the trash. The extra steps I took to hide how I discarded their efforts in cutting up fruit for me—efforts that, at the time, I couldn't see as anything but unnecessary and frustrating. Because, somehow, despite my own efforts, there would always be those sliced fruits on a platter on the dining table. Slowly, quietly, I built this resentment towards those fruits that were always waiting for me, regardless of how much I tried to avoid them. After all, if you want to do something, wouldn't you want to do it right—wipe off the knife, start fresh, and give it the care it deserves?

What I didn't realize, though, was that with every piece I threw away, I was also pushing away something deeper. A small piece of love, imperfect, yet still embodying the same care my parents gave in the small house we lived in. It wasn't just the fruit that was being discarded—it was the quiet sacrifice they made, the time they

squeezed into their labor hours just to show me their appreciation, so I could focus on my education, my future. Every argument we've had was met with not an "I'm sorry" or "I love you," but a platter of fruit waiting on the dining table. In those moments of frustration, I was blind towards the literal representation of their love right in front of me through those platters. The slices of fruit were where my parents kept their love: imperfect, but persistent, consistent, and always there for me.

Those were the golden days of my life. By the time our economy hit its lowest point, so did we. Money was tight, inevitable, but a harsh reality to face. The lack of financial stability pulled my parents away from their usual routine of peeling oranges or slicing apples for me. With bills stacking, tension thickening, and exhaustion becoming routine, my parents began to draw out of the small habits that once colored our evenings. The platters disappeared. The fruits, still bought, although in moderation, were left whole. Untouched. Waiting. *Waiting*.

At first, I didn't notice. I was older by then, more independent, more consumed by school and my own worries. The silence in the kitchen felt ordinary, like something I had grown into without realizing what I was growing out of. The empty dining table no longer caught my attention the way the stained platters once did. But the absence was there. Not loud or sudden—just quiet, like something fading in the background until it's gone completely.

It wasn't until I sat alone one night in my tiny, cramped room, too tired to study, too restless to sleep, that I realized something was missing. My stomach grumbled, not from hunger, but from a hollow ache I couldn't quite place. I walked to the fridge and stared at a bag of untouched apples, still in the mesh wrap from the store. Not sliced. Not plated. Just there slowly rotting away. I stood there for longer than I care to admit, realizing something that only the absence could teach me. For the first time in a long time, I missed the garlic tang. The uneven edges. The scratch paper I'd use to hide the ones I didn't like. The mess, the imperfection, the love.

It was strange—how something so simple could be so loud in its silence.

I closed the fridge without taking anything out. Somehow, the thought of peeling an apple myself felt heavier than it should have. Not because I didn't know how, but because I knew what it used to mean when someone else did it for me. It wasn't just fruit. It was their way of saying, *you're tired, so let me do this for you*. It was their way of showing up, even when they couldn't say much else through our barrier.

And now, in the stillness of that kitchen, I felt the weight of everything I used to overlook.

The plattered fruit was no longer there, not because they stopped caring, but because life had worn them thin. Because long hours and late nights had taken priority over soft gestures. And maybe, just maybe, they thought I no longer needed them. Maybe I had grown too old for platters.

But I hadn't.

I still craved the tenderness hidden in those small, imperfect acts. I still longed for the quiet ways my parents once told me they loved me—without saying a word. It was in the missing platters that I finally understood what they had been offering me all along: not just fruit, but care without condition, love without language as the barrier only grew between us with age.

Looking back, I wish I had known how to say thank you in the same language they spoke in, not in Mandarin, but through services. Or at the very least, to not hide the pieces I didn't like. But growing up in a household where words like "I'm sorry" and "I love you" weren't handed out freely, I didn't know how to receive love, and neither did I know how to recognize love when handed to me on a platter. Perhaps I've been searching for the wrong ways of receiving love, love that's smoothly communicated between both sides: Love that is perfect.

And their love never was. It was always stained with garlic, marked by labor, clinging to the scent of dinner prep, touched by tired hands after long shifts. But it was love nonetheless—steady, quiet, and enduring.

To my 妈 (Ma) and 爸 (Pa),
thank you for teaching me that love knows no bounds—for showing it through your actions when words fell short, for proving that unconditional love can live in silence.

So, if I may, let my platters of fruit take the place of yours—offering the same love you've always given me, just in the way I've finally learned to give it back.

This time, I'll be the one to show you unconditional love not through my broken Mandarin, but through the Chinese values that are rooted deep inside me.



The Invisible Threads

by Tejash Joshi
Marianas High School, 9th Grade

I grew up surrounded by palm trees and ocean breezes in Saipan, but it wasn't until I stood by a sacred river in Nepal, watching my papa step into the icy waters of the Devghat River, barefoot and cloaked in white, performing the traditional Death Kriya Karam for my grandmother, that I truly understood the depth of my heritage.

In 2023, after staying on the island for almost a decade, I returned to Nepal with my papa and revisited the roots I had left behind when my family moved to Saipan. With each step into my grandparents' house, memories surfaced from the depths of my subconscious. The place hadn't changed much; it still felt very familiar. The warmth, the scent in the air, and the presence of my grandparents made it feel like I had stepped right back into my childhood. In every room I entered, more flashes of childhood came back to me; moments of laughter, running around barefoot, and the simple joy of being a kid in a place that once felt like my entire world.

I stayed in Nepal for about seven months, and the more time I spent reconnecting with my relatives, the more I realized how much I had taken our culture and family for granted. I never fully understood the depth of our cultural values, religious and spiritual beliefs until I experienced them firsthand. As we all gathered, my elders guided me through our customs and rituals. I heard the significance and pride they held in protecting and passing down our heritage to me. Their teachings taught me about our traditions, and I discovered new layers of my identity and heritage. Even though it was heartwarming to be finally surrounded by our family, my papa and I were there for a deeper reason. To fulfill our duties as a son and a grandson of the family by honoring my grandmother's life through the sacred ritual of Kriya Karam. It was my first time experiencing a holy tradition passed down through generations in our Hindu religion. My heart was heavy as I stood there, saying goodbye to my grandmother for the last time. I joined my family in prayer, hoping her spirit would find peace in the beautiful place my elders always spoke of, a place beyond this life where the soul finally rests.

Kriya Karam lasts for 13 days, which is considered the mourning period for our lost loved ones. Various specific practices must be followed to complete this ritual, such as fasting, avoiding any physical contact, wrapping one's body with a long white cloth with no seams, and preparing food with no salt and no meat. The sons in the family must be the prominent persons performing the ritual to release the soul and allow it to find peace. This holy practice starts with the son shaving his head and being isolated in a designated place called the Temple. So,

for the next 13 days, my papa isolated himself in the Temple with a thin white cloth wrapped around him to pray every morning and prepare his food for the day. Witnessing my dad carry out each day with strength, deep devotion, and love was one of the most profound moments in my life. I began to understand what it truly means to be a son in our culture. Because at that moment, my papa wasn't just saying goodbye to his mother; he was honoring our centuries-old tradition and bearing the responsibility of guiding her soul toward peace. I had never felt the weight of our family on my shoulders. I felt both humbled and awakened. I realized that I, too, am expected to bear those sacred duties one day. I hadn't just witnessed a tradition but had stepped into the role of someone who would one day be trusted to carry the tradition forward.

My papa told me it's not just about our tradition but the invisible threads connecting us to our ancestors, which bind us all with faith, duty, and deep love. Every day, each prayer we chanted as a family felt like a stitch, threading us to our ancestors. My grandmother's passing, and my papa's love for her also became the very moment that stitched me back to our heritage. Each day of Kriya Karam allowed me to experience something new. I heard the same chants and prayers repeated over and over. At first, I didn't understand them at all. It sounded like a foreign language, but the more I listened, the more those chants became inspirational. The rhythm of all the priests, the sound of my papa's voice in prayer, the way he offered flowers and rice with both hands. I began to see it all not as a burden but as a form of our love for my grandmother. My grandfather helped me understand that these rituals are our way of turning our grief into peace. He also taught me that tradition isn't just something old but something that is living with us, passed from hand to hand and heart to heart. Those 13 days of Kriya Karam weren't just rituals but reminders of who we are and where we come from.

Since I returned from Nepal, I have learned more about the strength and dedication required to keep our ancient traditions alive in the busy modern world. I have a new respect for my parents and all the sons in our family who came before me. I thought a lot about what I experienced, and as the only son in my family, I want to carry our tradition forward and bear the responsibility of my family. I will never stop learning, respecting, asking questions, and honoring our ancestors' rituals. Now, whenever I think of my grandmother, I don't just remember the amazing woman who helped raise me but all the chants, the river, the white cloth, and my papa standing in silence with his head bowed. I remember the weight my papa told me about and what it means to belong to something greater than myself. I want to carry that significant tradition and the everyday acts of love, respect, and kindness I have learned and shaped who I am today.

I hope to pass on the traditions in the future, with stories of my grandparents and parents and the values they taught me that shaped my life. I understand that we live in a modern world that keeps moving forward and puts all the old traditions behind us, but these threads of our culture, love, and memories are strong enough to hold us together, no matter where we are and wherever we go. I may not live in Nepal, but I will carry the traditional values as I move forward, weaving them into my future with one thread, purpose, and story at a time.

Woven in Tradition

by Tyrone Santos
Marianas High School, 11th Grade

Having been born to a Filipino family in Saipan, I did not resonate with my culture. I was always transferred from one household to another at a very young age due to my parents being away for work or not having the ability to care for me consistently. Every family I stayed with presented me with different customs, traditions, and even different languages. Others introduced me to unfamiliar holidays or unknown dishes that I have never seen. However, I unknowingly adapted to each family, constantly blending myself like a chameleon, making me truly feel that I belonged to something I never had. These actions would cause me to slowly lose my understanding of my own culture, from the food, languages, and customs, to even the most basic manners in it. I didn't realize it then, but bit by bit, I was losing my place in a culture that was supposed to make me who I was—losing my path to not only where I had been, but who I was meant to become.

As this continued throughout my early years, I slowly became skilled at reading the room and adjusting myself to fit in within the family. Although some families were strict and structured or relaxed and calming, I mirrored my ways to match theirs without any hesitation, always silencing my own parts to make space for theirs. Slowly, every adjustment I made started to loosen the knot I have with my own culture. Over time, Filipino traditions became a distant memory—a fleeting idea filled with unfamiliar thoughts. I had forgotten the meanings behind our Filipino holidays, the stories behind the dishes we created, and even the very own language that surrounded me as a baby. I wasn't ashamed of being Filipino, but I felt like an impostor wearing a title that no longer fit. My heritage was no longer a part of me—it was something I had accidentally left behind, like a garment I'd outgrown.

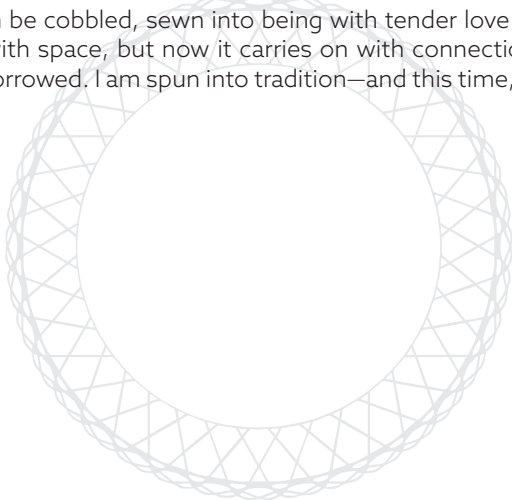
However, those times started to change when I met my nanny. This old lady began to sew me back to the culture I distanced myself from as if she was a grandma making her grandson a knitted scarf for winter. The mornings I spent with her were always filled with such earthly aromas of malunggay leaves or the tangy scent of sinigang simmering on the stove. She would always speak to me in Tagalog everyday even though I couldn't fully speak the language. From the stories she told, to the meals she would serve, and even to the way she disciplined me, she slowly began to stitch pieces of my identity back to me. The things that once felt foreign—our customs, our food, and even our history started to feel like something where I truly belonged. Every word and every meal, she slowly mended something that had been frayed for so long.

But just as I was finally beginning to fully become whole once more, light wasn't shining on this day. After coming home from school during an intense rain, my nanny fell ill, and within such a short time span she would unfortunately pass. The warmth of her presence was nothing more than a hazy blur, the comfort of her routines and the lessons she taught me were nothing more than a distant memory. It was as if the loom had stopped mid-weave, leaving loose threads hanging. Without the guidance of her being, I felt the fragile reconnection to my culture begin to fray once more. I ultimately feared that the teachings I've learned from her would fade away, just like her.

In the following month of her passing, I would feel unraveled once more. Always avoiding the dishes, she taught me to make and letting the language slip into silence. I started to beat myself up over it, constantly telling myself that I don't belong to my own culture. The pieces she had helped me gather suddenly broke apart, shattering like glass all over the floor. I was left with the patchwork of identity of some Filipinos, some borrowed from others—but none of it felt whole. I didn't know how to continue the work she had started.

Nevertheless, I pushed through, I didn't want her teachings to fade away and become useless, I didn't want her to just die in vain. Even though the threads were loose, I still had them. Slowly, I began to reweave them on my terms. All the different foods she taught me, I tried to make all the how she taught me. I tried my best to use basic Tagalog phrases just like how I talked with her. It was no longer about becoming the perfect image of tradition—it was about stitching my pattern into it. I soon realized that tradition isn't something that stays static—it evolves with us and it lives on through how we carry it. With every step I took, I carefully weaved myself back into the tapestry my nanny once held open for me.

Now, I am seventeen years old, but I still retain the threads that she left for me. I am less than ideal, no longer a foreigner to my own culture. I prepare Filipino food for guests, repeat back stories that once were told, and say what I can, proudly. It is through that experience that I've come to understand that one is not born whole, full of identity—the identity can be cobbled, sewn into being with tender love and attention. My journey began with space, but now it carries on with connection. I am no longer lost in patterns borrowed. I am spun into tradition—and this time, the thread is in my hands.



Inafa'maolek: The Stand of Our People

by Ciana M. Agulto
Marianas High School, 11th Grade

Under the tropical heavens of Saipan, where the ocean tells tales of our ancestors and the land is imprinted with the footsteps of our past generations, inafa'maolek is the pulse of the Chamorro people. It is a part of our people's culture much deeper than tradition, it is a way of life, mindset, and promise of harmony, compassion, and communal prosperity. For a people as small as Saipan, this is not just important, it is life, it is essential to existence, identity, and preserving our culture and for me, inafa'maolek has intertwined the story of who I am.

Inafa'maolek is translated most closely to "restoring harmony or order." At its core, it is about reconnection and that what affects one affects us all. When practicing inafa'maolek, it means to show respect to our elders, offering help without being asked to, sharing food with everyone, and maintaining strong relationships with each other. As long as I can remember, I was taught to honor my elders by greeting them with respect, to help set up and clean up after every family get-together, and I always had to share whatever I had, even if it were just a bag of sembe or a box of Hi-C. These small things were not just rituals we practiced, these things were what we were as Chamorros.

As I got older, I realized how these small things made me who I was as a young child growing up in the Mariana Islands. They have taught me empathy, responsibility, and the importance of community relationships. I would never be able to envision myself as a person separate from the people around me; I envision myself as part of something greater, a web of family, culture, and heritage. Whether as a volunteer in church or aiding my grandmother, every little act of inafa'maolek is a thread that makes up part of my existence.

The practice of looking after each other deepens even further in such a small island of Saipan, where one has few means and people generally rely more on each other rather than on systems. When a family is in distress, whether in sickness or in death, it is the community that rallies together to help them. Our wisdom is transmitted to us by our elders not in books but in stories, advice, and companionship. Little kids are not only raised by their parents but by a larger family of aunties, uncles, cousins, and neighbors. In a close-knit society, the practice of inafa'maolek helps keep society strong, grounded, and resilient. It taught me to keep connection higher than competition, service above self.

In addition, inafa'maolek keeps the identity of Chamorros intact despite challenges of modern times. As external forces change, reshaping the world, island cultures are likely to feel pressured to change or conform. But inafa'maolek, Chamorros hold on to their heritage. It reminds us of what we are: people who value respect, togetherness, and the idea that we are strongest when we are together as one. For me, that reminder is so personal, it grounds me when I am lost and makes me proud when I look back at where I'm from. In an era where individualism tends to rule supreme, inafa'maolek offers a strong counterpoint. It is a reminder that victory is not just individual, it is more communal. That the well-being of a village is greater than the success of a home and that taking care of one another is not a burden but a blessing.

All in all, inafa'maolek is not only a cultural practice but a living, breathing manifestation of Chamorro culture that affects how we live, how we relate, and how we survive. To the Chamorro people and to the community of Saipan in general, it is what keeps us together, through generations, seas, and the rise and fall of time. To me, it is the thread that helped to sew the tapestry of my identity. One anchored in culture, shaped by service, and strengthened by the love from and for my people.



The Tradition Behind a Visit

by Maya Jae Jung
Kagman High School, 10th Grade

What really is tradition? Is it just something you do because your parents tell you to do it or is it something more, something that shows who we are? To a lot of people, it's just doing the same thing over and over without knowing why, but there are some who actually know the story behind their traditions. Traditions bring people together while also helping us remember our past. They can be anything from fun party games to honoring your family or even dancing! They play important parts in our lives, keeping cultures alive, creating memories, and even helping us set our values and beliefs.

For example, one of the most important customs in my family is that we go to Japan every year in order to visit my Obachan (great grandma) and uncle. When we go, we always have at least one day where we have dinner at my grandma's childhood house. As we enter the tiny home, there's bursts of smells, meat, sweets, fruits, and the strong smell of incense from a small altar for my Ojichan (great grandpa). These smells give me a feeling of nostalgia every time I enter there after a tiring day of biking around and shopping, like I'm stepping into my childhood memories and it comforts me with a tight hug of smells and sounds. After I set down my bike keys and walk towards the small kitchen the floorboards creak, so loudly you'd think you're in a horror film, I settle down in the dining area that can comfortably fit at least 4 people, but we still manage to fit in 9 when we squeeze. Everyone's laughing, sharing what's happened to them in the last year since we last visited. Nostalgia hits as we all say "Itadakimasu (Thank you for the food)" when we start to eat our share of the tiny platters of food we bought and set out from the su—pa— (supermarket) and other restaurants. The fresh cups of Pocari Sweat that my Obachan always has when we visit have never tasted this refreshing. It's been so long, or at least it feels like it's been, one year is so much when you're longing for the place you think of as a second home. Once we finish, everyone's full and tired, they talk their last conversations as my uncle shows me and my exhausted little sister, anime on the TV, "Oh! This is that one anime! I remember last time it was a different one showing." I say, as he tells me more about the show. Among all the food, laughter, and shopping, there's one part of the trip we always do that is the most special to me, when we visit my great grandfather's grave in order to clean, leave food for him, and show our respects. I may have never met my great grandpa, but this tradition helps me feel closer to him and my family. On the island of Saipan where I stay, things aren't as lively here, we don't have the same small dinners and cleanups because our whole family isn't there, this is why our trips to Japan are so meaningful.

These traditions have shaped my identity by making me embrace my culture more and help me understand where I come from. If this tradition was never introduced to me I wouldn't know much about my background, who my family in Japan is, or why I should value them. It makes me look forward to the next time we go every single year, that's how important this tradition is to me, it helped me see who I really am and why tradition really affects my culture. Without these trips, I wouldn't be as in touch as I am now with my Japanese side, I'd really just feel like the odd one out if I ever continued to go to Japanese school or other cultural events, not knowing why they do certain things. These traditions continue to influence my beliefs, morals, and ethics as I grow older. They help me understand what really matters and what I should prioritize as a person. Honestly, to me tradition isn't just about repeating things over and over again, it's about doing things with the people you love and becoming more connected with them.

One important moment in my life where a tradition helped me through a challenge is when I faced hard times during middle school. I had felt disconnected from my friends and our yearly Japanese trip was creeping around the corner. I wasn't as happy about it as I should've been, I just thought of it as another trip that I had to go on, not knowing the importance of it. That year, I didn't feel as connected to the trip as the other previous years. I had so much to deal with at the time from drama with my friends to other personal stress that I just couldn't appreciate the visit. When we arrived in Japan, the smell and familiarity reminded me of my past visits. The beautiful views of the city while heading to Tokyo on a bus from the airport is something I can't forget, the peacefulness and chirps of bugs at parks when I'm biking around spending time with my grandma, or even the bustling city streets at night time when everyone including my family is trying to find a place to eat before they end their day. They all connected and reminded me that even if my life is changing there's always a place of comfort that feels like home where I can be with my family in peace.

When I'm older I hope these traditions continue to stick with the generations to come because they can create so many lifetime memories from trips like this. I can imagine my little sister and I being the ones planning these visits for our own families in the future, showing them the places, people, and things that helped us make our childhood extra special. I want to keep every tradition alive, even the small ones, because they all equally mean as much to me. Every single one of them has made me grow into the person I am today, and I hope they do the same thing for my family who I pass it onto in the future.

In the end, traditions are more than just repetitive actions with no sense behind them, they hold and create so many different lessons, memories, and connections for us that our ancestors may have wanted us to learn and experience. They can help us understand who passed this tradition down to us more clearly and what their values in life were. We can pass down old traditions and even build newer ones for future generations to experience the joy we may have had doing these things. In my life my tradition of going to Japan helped me build a deeper connection with my loved ones and let me learn about where I come from. For many, tradition strengthens not only bonds but also a person's sense of identity and understanding of one's self.

Ingredients of Tradition

by Gregorio Joseph Rodriguez
Kagman High School, 10th Grade

Every evening at exactly 5:00 pm, the familiar sound of Chamorro music fills our home. The nostalgic melodies of David Peter and other oldies Chamorro music blasting from the speakers, “Dos lugât malagu-yu na baihu gaigi gi hinasoso-mu yan gi korason-mu neni” signaling the start of a tradition that has been passed down for generations, cooking together as a family. The scent of sizzling BBQ and the smell of freshly made chicken kelaguen and empanada fill the air, blending with the laughter and side conversations of my family. This is more than just making food, it’s a way of staying connected, of honoring our culture, and of shaping who I am today.

Cooking is a cherished tradition deeply rooted in my family, where each meal carries with it memories of love, laughter, and togetherness. As we cut, grill, and combine various recipes, stories are told just as freely as we prepare the food. It has always been a way for us to connect. My parents and uncles would always tell us stories about their childhood. When life was simpler, but full of valuable experiences and life-long lessons. For example, they told us not to jump off the roof of our outside kitchen because they did that as kids too and now their backs hurt. Through their stories, I can almost see them as children, playing around, learning the same lessons they pass on to us now.

These moments are a reminder to me that traditions aren’t just about the past. They are alive in the present, influencing how we see the world and how we carry ourselves.

Our tradition of cooking has strengthened this value by reinforcing the importance of togetherness, respect, and continuity. As we gather to prepare and share meals, we learn the significance of family bond, cooperation, and joy of nurturing others. In our kitchen, everyone has their own role, no job is too small. We listen, we help, and we learn from each other. If one of my younger cousins or sibling’s confused on how to do a particular task, we patiently try to help them understand how to do it, just like how I was taught.

I remember the first job I was tasked with, it was to cut one hundred pieces of 6x6 inches of plastic to press the empanada dough. I would always ask my mom or uncle lots of questions like “Is the plastic big enough?” and they would show how I could adjust it and make it better. It wasn’t just about making the food, it was about learning patience, precision, appreciation for hard work, and the importance of paying attention to detail, which would all help translate to everyday life.

When we're all finished preparing, we would gather together at the table, bless the food, and continue sharing stories, knowing that our meal is more than just food, it's a reflection of our love, bond, and our respect for each other. The table is filled with laughter, the sound of forks and spoons hitting the plates, and my uncles getting their ukuleles out to sing together. It's in these moments that I feel closest to my culture. These traditions remind me that food isn't just for feeding the body, it's about nourishing our relationships and keeping our family's spirit alive. It is a way to pass down the values we've learned from generation to generation.

Beyond the kitchen, respect plays a big role in every aspect of life. From a young age, my elders always taught my siblings, cousins, and I the importance of respect. They always taught us that you can never go wrong if you're humble and respectful. If we're respectful towards others, they'll give us the same kind of respect in return. It also has a tremendous positive impact on us. It helps change the way we approach the world. I think these practices helped shape me into a pretty good person. It allowed me to build strong relationships with others because I listen and respect others' values and opinions. It made me a better student because I show gratitude toward my teachers and remain open to learning new things. It has given me a kind of new confidence because I know that treating others with kindness, humility, and respect will lead to positive interactions.

These traditions have also helped me in different situations. Like for example, when I was struggling to learn this new lesson in math and I had to bring it home as homework. I had no idea how to even start to try and solve the problem. I was just going to try and remember how my teacher explained it to me and finish it on my own, but my family's values reminded me that it's okay to ask for help. Just like how we work together in the kitchen, I asked my sisters to help me understand and finish it. They reassured me that asking for help isn't a weakness but a way to grow and get new experiences.

Now that I look and think about the future, I wonder how these traditions will continue to change and evolve. While there might be stuff like technology that might change certain aspects of our daily lives, I hope that the core of our values and traditions remain as strong as they are now. I want to pass these values down to my own children and my siblings' children too. I want to teach them how to cook the food that I love, to share stories of our family's past, and to teach them a strong emphasis on respect like the one that has been the foundation of my growth and upbringing.

Cooking together and respect are important parts of my family's traditions. When we make food, we exercise patience, teamwork, and the joy of being together. These moments remind us to value and love each other. Culture isn't just about history, it's something we live every day. These traditions have helped shape me into the person I am today. I know they will continue to guide me in the future. Long after the music fades and the last plate is washed, these traditions will remain to be woven into every dish I make and every lesson I share, keeping my family's spirit alive.

Tradition in Every Fold

by Amy Park
Marianas High School, 9th Grade

Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." These are words that reverberate deep within my heart when I reflect on the traditions that have shaped me into the person I am today. Hi, I am Amy, and I am a freshman student at Marianas High School, Saipan, a small but beautiful island in the Pacific Ocean. Although I now live thousands of miles from where I was born, I carry with me the culture, values, and tradition of Korea, the country of origin of my forebears.

I was born in Korea, where festivals are not just a time for celebrations but a part of everyday life. Even when I moved to Saipan as a child, the traditions never stopped being. My family brought them with us, like treasures kept in our hearts and minds. Chuseok, the Korean harvest festival, is one of the strongest threads that runs through the tapestry of my existence. Even though my family is still in Korea and we are far away, we celebrate Chuseok in Saipan every fall. We don't return to Korea, but we do our best to keep the true spirit of the holiday.

Chuseok is a season of thanksgiving, of remembering where we came from and honoring the ancestors who came before us. In Saipan, my family prepares a traditional Korean meal, wears our hanbok, and bows respectfully to our ancestors—even though they're halfway around the world. I remember waking up early with my mom the day before Chuseok to help her prepare songpyeon, half-moon-shaped rice cakes filled with sesame seeds and brown sugar. As we sat at the kitchen table shaping each piece, she would tell me about her life in Korea—about my grandparents, the small village where she grew up, and how her family celebrated Chuseok beneath the fall moon. Those were the times I knew that tradition isn't geographically localized—it's love, memory, and meaning.

I was raised in Saipan, and often found myself living between two worlds. I looked Korean, yet I never did quite fit into either world. My friends wouldn't always understand why I had to bow on New Year's Day or why we prepared so much food for holidays. Every now and again, I would feel different—and being different is hard when all you're trying to do is fit in. I would take my kimchi lunch or would not talk about my family heritage because I never wanted to appear weird.

But something did begin to shift as I grew older. I started to realize that being different is not something to be ashamed of—it's a strength. Our traditions are like invisible threads that sew us to our families, our heritage, and to the virtues that guide us through life. They're what make us us. And more than that, they allow us to stand strong when we're lost in times of confusion.

One of the greatest experiences that I have ever had was the multicultural fair in our school. I was invited to represent Korea and was at first hesitant. I didn't think anyone would care. But my parents encouraged me to present our Chuseok tradition. I wore my pink and blue hanbok, assisted my mom in preparing songpyeon, and created a small exhibit with pictures and Korean calligraphy. When I explained to my classmates and teachers about the holiday, something amazing happened—they listened. They asked questions. They smiled while they ate the food. For the first time, I did not feel that I was either simply Korean or simply from Saipan—I was both. And I was proud of it.

Traditions have shaped my perspective. Korean tradition has made me value respect for elders, family appreciation, and gratitude for what one already has. It has also made me patient—through the very extensive preparation process in cooking—and humble—through the unassuming way we respect our ancestors. These principles apply to my daily life, even at school or with peers. These remind me to stay persistent, be kind, and appreciate the people in my life.

Looking towards the future, I am certain that these traditions will shift and change along with me. Maybe someday I'll have children of my own, and I'll show them how to make songpyeon or bow at the start of New Year's Day. Maybe we'll do Chuseok in a distant land, but the very spirit of it will be the same. That is the beauty of tradition—it adapts, but never disappears. It lives on within us.

The traditions that were instilled in me at birth continue to shape who I am becoming. I may be thousands of miles from Korea, but my heart belongs to my culture and ancestors. And in times of peace and hardship, I know where I stand—firmly standing on the love of my family, strengthened by the values carried down through the generations, and privileged to perpetuate the lovely, unbroken strands of my Korean heritage.



Carried by Culture

by Akieko Atinisom
Kagman High School, 10th Grade

To me, culture is more than just tradition—it's the way we love, live, and grow through the wisdom passed down by those who came before us. Through values, beliefs, attire, language, and stories, I've discovered who I am and who I strive to become.

One of the values that has always been a cornerstone in my life is respect. While it may not be a tradition in the typical sense, it's a sacred value my family has cherished and upheld from generation to generation. We believe that elders are always to be respected, but we also know that true respect is something earned. No matter how old someone is, everyone deserves to be treated with kindness, dignity, and understanding.

Alongside respect, faith holds a deep place in our hearts. We follow the Lord's word and remain rooted in that spiritual guidance. Though we may stumble and sin, we are human—and in every moment, we are reminded to pray. My family has taught me to pray through everything: the good, the bad, and everything in between. We give thanks for the simplest blessings—waking up in the morning, finishing a day, having the chance to love and be loved, making mistakes, and being given the grace to fix them. We are thankful for warm beds, food on the table, water to drink, and so much more. These everyday luxuries, which others may overlook, are the very things I've grown to deeply appreciate. When I say "luxury," I don't mean material wealth—I mean the bare necessities that many go without.

I am endlessly grateful for my family and the love they pour into me. Their support has carried me through every season of life, and I truly believe I am who I am because of them. Every day, every hour, every second of my life is lived in honor of them. My mom is my first best friend, my safe haven, my heart. My grandparents have loved me as their own, always making sure I had everything I needed and more. My cousins, who I see as brothers and sisters, have been by my side through the best and worst of times. My aunties never fail to lift my spirits with their laughter and love, and every one of my uncles is someone I've looked up to as a father figure. If I had the choice, I'd choose my family again in every lifetime.

Just as respect and faith ground my family, so does the way we express our culture—especially through what we wear. I am both Carolinian and Chuukese. Two cultural garments that hold deep meaning for me are the mwaar (Carolinian) and the skato (Chuukese). Mwaars are flower crowns gifted during celebrations—graduations, weddings, birthdays, confirmations, and more. They can be

simple or intricate, filled with any flowers you choose, making each one a beautiful, personal expression of creativity. That's one of the things I love most about them.

The skato is a traditional skirt, and it comes in all kinds of vibrant colors and patterns. You can even sew your own if you want a unique look. I wear mine often—it gives me a sense of comfort and connection. These garments have taught me the importance of preserving our culture, so that each generation that comes after us can feel the same pride and belonging we do when we create or wear them.

There was a time when I felt ashamed to wear cultural attire in public. It didn't feel "normal" or accepted. But as I got older, I realized how powerful it is to own your identity. I stopped caring about how others saw me, and instead, started embracing my culture with confidence. Now, I wear my mwaar and skato proudly—and with them, I carry generations of tradition.

Along with the clothes, I've also grown to deeply appreciate our language. Even though I don't know everything, I treasure the words and phrases I do understand. It's not just about speaking—it's about being connected to our stories, our values, and our history. Learning the language opened a door to understanding legends, practices, and morals I once overlooked.

As a child, I didn't always understand the meaning behind certain traditions. Sometimes, I even thought they were silly. I thought this because they didn't make sense to me. How could a simple act lead to being disrespectful, like bringing your baby to the beach without being baptised, wearing a necklace when pregnant, and cleaning during the night. But I still followed them out of respect. It wasn't until I witnessed the consequences of others ignoring those traditions that I truly understood their weight. For example, there was a time at PauPau Beach when someone used the restroom in the bushes without permission. As they were about to leave, they suddenly began to burn up, crying and twisting in pain—as if possessed. A suruhana (witch doctor) had to perform medicine on her, and it took a whole week for the spirit to fully leave her.

Another time, a family member went night swimming and while exiting the water, stepped over a taotaomona (ancestral spirit) preparing to rest. The next morning, their feet were painfully swollen, and even though doctors found nothing wrong, the pain didn't go away. It wasn't until a friend's father—who had knowledge like a suruhanu—explained what had happened and helped them make a mwaar as an offering of forgiveness, placing it at the place where she had stepped over them, then the swelling began to disappear.

These moments taught me that our traditions are not just stories—they are real, powerful, and deserving of respect. I've learned to move through life more carefully, more mindfully, and more honorably because of what I've seen.

As I grow older, I will continue to carry these traditions- values, beliefs, attire, language, and stories with me, and one day, I'll pass them on. I want future generations to feel the same pride, reverence, and connection I feel now. Culture is more than the things we do—it's the soul of who we are. And I will forever be grateful to be carried by mine.





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