

DANCING DEFIANCE: THE POLITICS OF POHNPEIAN DANCE PERFORMANCES

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Social life, as we all know, is complex. Meaningful human social activity often undertakes multiple tasks simultaneously. Activities intended to organize life within a community may at the same time mark boundaries distinguishing that group from others. A colleague of mine, an Orthodox Jew, tells of a man shipwrecked on the proverbial desert island. When he is at last rescued, he insists on showing off the two synagogues he has constructed. Why two? "Ah," he says. "This is the *shul* where I pray. And this is the *shul* I won't set foot in!"

My essay is about one of these multiplex forms of social activity: dancing. The people of Pohnpei use this art form to transmit several contrasting messages concurrently. Such messages would be difficult to communicate simultaneously in speech--Pohnpeian or English. But dance seems to convey them quite effectively.

A particular set of dances calls attention to Pohnpeian accounts of how their ancestors defended the island from invaders.¹ At the same time, these dances make it clear that very specific, local communities performed these acts of heroism. The dances communicate, simultaneously, both the island as a whole's history of defying outsiders and the local community's defiance of its neighbors.

Many--though by no means all--Micronesian dances are martial in form and spirit. Among other functions, they enable these otherwise peaceable people to remind both themselves and others of the continued value they place on military prowess (and their history of exhibiting it),

Pacific Studies, Vol. 15, No. 4--December 1992

even under conditions of colonial rule by vastly more powerful nations. What I seek to describe here is by no means peculiar to Pohnpei; I have seen many Micronesians engage in similar performances. But I know something of Pohnpei's history, ancient and modern, and I know many of its dancers. It is in appreciating the historical nuance and the personal history that we most clearly see the meanings in the stories underlying the dances.

Pohnpei is the largest of the Eastern Caroline Islands. Its current population is probably in excess of thirty thousand. Before the first Europeans and their diseases arrived (ca. 1830), the population was perhaps a bit smaller; a long period of depopulation reached its low point at the turn of the century (Riesenberg 1968:6). Kolonia, the island's only town, is now the capital of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). Many people from other Micronesian islands have come to the island to work for the FSM government; they live in or near Kolonia. Most Pohnpeian families continue to live on and cultivate their rural farmsteads, sending one or more members into town daily to work for the government, the island's main source of cash employment.

The town of Kolonia, the State of Pohnpei, and the Federated States of Micronesia as a whole each has an elected government and a bureaucracy. Outside of town, the island is still divided into five *wehi*, the "traditional" paramount chiefdoms, with hereditary chiefs and multiple lines of political titles of varying rank and status. These chiefdoms are also chartered as municipalities and have elected governments, but daily political life within them makes little differentiation between traditional and elective office.

Within these paramount chiefdoms are numerous local chiefdoms (*kousapw*). Furthermore, until the onset of colonial administration (in the 1880s), the paramount chiefdoms waxed and waned in number, size, and strength; certain areas of the island, such as Awak, where I work, have, since ancient times, claimed and often exercised effective autonomy from the larger chiefdoms in which they are now included. Political activity entails endless maneuvering within and between all these regions and chiefdoms. It is complex, and it is the stuff of social life on this rich and fertile island, where making a living takes up relatively little of people's time.

Mythohistorical Background

Because this essay is about dances, and the dances are about history, I must set the scene with background drawn from Pohnpei's mythology

and oral history. For my purposes here, I am not going to make distinctions between the various genres that recount the past; I discuss this problem elsewhere (Petersen 1990). What is relevant is that despite the existence of certain “authorized” versions of “Pohnpeian history” (e.g., Bernart 1977), there really is no version of the past acceptable to all the islanders. As David Hanlon points out (1988:25), the islanders maintain that “*Pohnpei sohte ehu*” (Pohnpei is not one). Political distinctions between and among the many communities are symbolized by a host of differences in mythology and customary observances (*tiahk*).

Pohnpei’s “modern” polity (that is, the current system of chieftainship) traces its roots to events purported to have taken place at least several generations before the arrival of the first Europeans and the start of written history on the island. These events in turn draw upon earlier episodes, running, in some versions, back to the beginnings of the island. In summary:

After the island itself had been built up out of the water by people who journeyed there from the south or east, and had been provided with food, shelter, fire, and so forth by other travelers, construction of a center for islandwide religious worship was undertaken. Led by two voyagers from the west, the people built Nan Madol, a vast complex of large-scale stone architecture, the ruins of which still sit off the east coast of the island. In turn, Nan Madol became the seat of a dynasty of tyrants, the Sau Deleurs, who ruled the entire island. Eventually, local discontent and the interference of deities provoked an invasion by the culture hero Isokelekel, who--though son of one of these Pohnpei deities--had grown up in Katau, a legendary land to the east (often identified as Kosrae, but see Goodenough 1986).

Isokelekel and his troops overthrew the last Sau Deleur and presided over the dismantling of Pohnpei’s centralized political system. Following much deliberation, the island’s new and remaining leaders instituted the modern system of autonomous paramount chiefdoms. Today’s Madolenihmw chiefs trace their ancestry back (matrilineally) to Isokel-ekel, and the modern chiefdoms are organized around principles of decentralized government. Unlike some Polynesian polities, in which the chiefs claim to be foreigners, Pohnpeians believe their leaders to be indigenes; but they acknowledge that the political system itself, which they hold in the greatest respect (*wahu*, the term for respect, can in some contexts refer to the entire political system), is the product of a foreign intervention.

Two themes in these cycles are especially relevant in this context. First, we can distill out some political theory: originally, there was

anarchy; the people organized themselves by creating a system of centralized government; this deteriorated into tyranny; the tyrant was overthrown and his regime replaced by a decentralized set of locally autonomous chiefdoms. The modern polity, then, is in part the result of trial and error, as it were, and in part a product of deliberate, carefully considered decisions about the proper nature of government. It is viewed as now having withstood the test of time.

Second, we confront Pohnpeian ambivalence about the outside world. Little of great importance happens on Pohnpei without some sort of foreign intervention. But foreign influence serves merely to set off a chain of events over which Pohnpeians exercise control. Foreigners are not to be repelled from the island's shores; they are welcome but must be kept in their place--a situation that is described to them through the recounting of this history. (The island's contact and early colonial history certainly bear this out.)

The irony here is that many tales that recount *opposition* to Isokelekel's invasion are told in a highly celebratory fashion, and such tales are matters of great pride in the localities where they are alleged to have taken place. In this essay I refer to two of these; one comes from Awak, where I work, and the other is from U, the paramount chiefdom of which Awak is now a part.

Dancing Defiance

"Uh Likin Pehi en Awak"

The Awak tale, which appears in none of the published texts (though an obscure version appears in the "Silten manuscript"; see Petersen 1990), is often recounted in Awak--I have heard it many times. It is set during the time preceding Isokelekel's landing at Nan Madol, as his flotilla is making its way along the island's northern shore after an initial landfall on And, a small atoll a few miles off Pohnpei's west coast.

In this version, as in many others, Isokelekel's destination is not necessarily Nan Madol. He attempted a landing in Awak, sailing into its bay under cover of night. Modern Pohnpeians explain that their homes have traditionally been scattered about the hills (as they remain today) as a means of preventing surprise attacks on entire communities, but in this case the strategy nearly backfired: the invaders might have secured a beachhead without a fight. Fortunately, an *eni aramas*, a sort of ancestral spirit or part-human legendary hero, observed the invaders'

approach. He saw that there was no time to gather a force strong enough to repel them.

Acting quickly, he leapt onto a stone jutting up out of water “just beyond” (*likin*) Awak’s altar or place of worship (*pehi en Awak*). There he “stood up” (*uh*) and danced a ferocious war dance. Then he jumped down behind the stone and changed his palm-leaf skirt (in the past, well-dressed Pohnpeian men wore multiple layers of skirts). He again ascended and resumed his dance, repeating the performance over and over until the approaching invaders were convinced that a full-sized body of troops awaited to engage them in battle. Having lost the element of surprise, Isokelekel decided to seek a more vulnerable spot for his landing.

This story is called “Uh Likin Pehi en Awak” (Standing Up Beyond the Altar of Awak). The home where I stay when I work in Awak lies no more than fifty yards from the site of this great feat, and I have had the tale recited to me, in many versions, countless times. I have also watched Awak’s children perform chants and dances that tell of this episode.

In 1974-1975 the people of Awak, using American funding for materials and equipment, built a large, modern schoolhouse on a plot of land dredged up out of the bay, again just yards from the site of Isokelekel’s attempted invasion. When it was completed, the new school’s name was painted boldly across its facade, in large block letters: UH LIKIN PEHI EN AWAK SUKUHL.² Inside this schoolhouse the students are charged with studying English, world geography, and a host of other subjects. But each day as they enter, they are reminded of Awak’s history--and its history of resistance to threats from abroad.

Anyone passing this new building, Pohnpeian or foreigner, cannot help gazing at it. It stands out clearly visible at the water’s edge, unlike nearly everything else on this densely vegetated island. Its size, too, draws attention. While it makes obvious the impact of foreign money and learning, it simultaneously proclaims Awak’s proud heritage of effective resistance.

Pohnpeian children get their Pohnpeian history, civics, and art lessons via dance. They perform these dances on important occasions at the school--indeed, they performed a dance that told this story at the dedication of the new schoolhouse--and I first learned a good deal of what I know about Awak’s history while watching dances performed at schools. As I said, the Pohnpeians manage to harness foreign influences with their own cultural forms.

"Pidehk en Dolen Wenik"

Now, according to tales told a little farther east, a similar fate befell Isokelekel and his company as they headed on into U. Again they attempted a landing. In this case, another spirit man spotted them as he stood in front of a sharp peak known as the Dolen Wenik (literally, "the Hill of Wenik," the name of the U area in the time before the founding of the modern paramount chiefdom). The spirit man danced a bit, moved behind the peak, and then reappeared from the other side. Again and again he repeated this "circuit" (*pidehk*), making it seem that a large force waited behind the hill, ready for battle. Once more Isokelekel decided that his chances would be better elsewhere and chose to sail on, eventually coming ashore at Nan Madol and in time vanquishing the Sau Deleur in a battle commencing there. This story, is called "Pidehk en Dolen Wenik" (Making a Circuit Around the Hill of Wenik).

In 1985 a group of adult dancers from U and Awak traveled to Tahiti to represent the Federated States of Micronesia at the Pacific Arts Festival. When they returned, they spoke animatedly about their reception there, proudly displaying copies of Pape'ete newspapers featuring their troupe. They were, they told everyone at home, the only dancers to perform in true island style: each of the dancers was liberally anointed in coconut oil (a ritually charged practice for Pohnpeians) and the women, as well as the men, danced bare-breasted. This latter action, still taken for granted on Pohnpei, clearly surprised and reportedly enchanted all who saw the Pohnpeian troupe perform.

The dancers were proud of having shown the rest of the Pacific that Pohnpeians, if not all Micronesians, cling tightly to their traditions. They are acutely aware of the mild disdain in which the Micronesians are held by other Pacific Islanders because of their close political ties to the United States. They chose, then, to make a clear statement about Pohnpei's independent spirit.

Most notable in this context, however, was the name the group selected for itself. The dancers called themselves the "Pwihn en 'Pidehk en Dolen Wenik' " ("Pidehk en Dolen Wenik" Group). They were the Federated States of Micronesia's official representatives to the arts festival, but clearly represented themselves as Pohnpeians, not simply "Micronesians." At the same time, they focused the symbolism of their name (and on Pohnpei few things bear more symbolic power than names) on a local event--the local community's successful resistance to

the invading Isokelekel--and in that sense they were not simply "Pohnpeians."

Isokelekel is as close to an islandwide culture hero as we can hope to find on Pohnpei. Tales about him mesh into nearly every aspect of life (Ward 1989:64). Nonetheless, the island's official goodwill ambassadors chose a name that reflected local ascendancy over the hero of the whole. In any report about the Tahiti performance, either within Pohnpei and Micronesia or out and about in the broader world, the story of how Isokelekel was repelled by U is proclaimed. Never mind that the outsiders do not know what they are being reminded of, everyone on Pohnpei knows, and everyone on Pohnpei knows what is being displayed to the world: U defiant.

Before I move on to the final dance performance I intend to discuss, I want to make two small points. The first begins as a minor aside, really; but it has underlying significance. I recall as a child reading stories that remarkably parallel the "Uh Likin Pehi en Awak" and "Pidehk en Dolen Wenik" tales. One was set in China (and presented as a Chinese folk-tale). A city with a small defense force was under siege by a much larger army. Following someone's inspiration, the city's tailors worked around the clock for days, sewing set upon set of uniforms in various colors and styles. Then the city's soldiers marched on the ramparts repeatedly, changing into new uniforms with each circuit. Eventually their enemies were convinced that the city was defended by a vastly superior force and lifted the siege.

Another tale came from America's Civil War. A small force (and I no longer recall if it was Confederate or Union) outwitted a larger force by marching 'round and 'round a hill. Their opponents' view was limited to a small number of troops at one time passing a break in the trees; they saw a seemingly endless procession marching by. Convinced that they were overwhelmingly outnumbered, the onlookers withdrew. (I have also read that Mussolini employed a similar stratagem to impress Hitler when the Führer visited Rome.)

The ruses themselves are widely employed, at least in imagination if not on the field of battle, and the tactics are by no means peculiar to Pohnpei. Indeed, they appear in Stith Thompson's motif index of folktales as Motif No. K2368 (1955-1958, 4:496). What stands out about the Pohnpei tales lies in the context of the telling. The tales celebrate local victories over both foreign invaders and the island as a whole. As such they communicate simultaneously both the islanders' ability to defend themselves against outside aggression *and* local 'communities' capacity

to resist centralizing tendencies within the island's confines. The tales are chosen as highly appropriate topics for dance performances precisely because they so effectively communicate defiance to both outsiders and neighbors--no mean feat.

A second notable theme running through these tales lies in their portrayal of Isokelekel's progress toward Nan Madol and the Sau Deleur. The primary recorded versions (Bernart 1977; Hadley 1981) tell this history from the perspective of Nan Madol and Madolenihmw, the paramount chiefdom that succeeded it in eastern Pohnpei. In these presentations, Isokelekel heads directly to his confrontation with the Sau Deleur. In the Awak and U versions, however, he tries repeatedly, to effect a landing along the island's north coast and arrives at Nan Madol only after having failed elsewhere.

The sequence of events described in these variant tales parallels the earlier mythohistory leading up to the founding of Nan Madol itself. Two brothers from the west, Olsihpa and Olsohpa, try repeatedly to begin work on the proposed ceremonial center. They start in Sokehs (on the west coast), then move on to various sites in Net (on the northwest coast) and U (in the northeast) before finally settling on the site where they achieve ultimate success, on the island's extreme eastern shore.

The emphasis given to this sequence of false starts is, in fact, the source of my vision of the Pohnpei people's deliberate ambivalence about dealing with foreigners. They see (indeed desire) that the outside world has an impact upon their lives. But they also seek to control this impact and shape it to their own purposes. Their myths, when examined at length rather than in summary fashion, reduce the stature of these strangers and make them pliable: the mighty Isokelekel, for instance, is cowed by the sight of *kotop* palms (*Exorrhiza ponapensis*), whose white inflorescent branches he thinks are skirts, mistaking the trees for giants. In each of these two great myth cycles, the foreigners are required to move slowly around the island, undergoing a series of unsuccessful trials before finally achieving success at Nan Madol. Pohnpeians place them where they deem appropriate. The strangers are transformed by these experiences; they are no longer totally foreign, though they never become fully Pohnpeian, either.

Many tales are told in Pohnpeian song and dance performances. Not all are as political as the two I have selected to explore here. But it is no coincidence that these two are stories that I--a foreigner, an American--have often heard. Nor is it coincidence that the large Awak schoolhouse, paid for by the United States, and the Pacific Arts Festival dance troupe, underwritten by the FSM government, are christened with

names that conjure up defiant spirits. These performances allow Pohnpeians to transmit complex messages quickly and clearly.

“The Sokehs Rebellion”

The last dance performance I shall discuss draws upon recent, rather than mythological, history. In 1910, a large number of the Sokehs chiefdom's people (most of them from Sokehs Island, which is separated from the rest of the chiefdom on Pohnpei Island's mainland by a narrow, mangrove-choked channel) rebelled against the German colonial administration. They killed the governor and some of his aides, then laid siege to the garrison. In time the Germans mounted an invasion, reinforced by Melanesian troops from Rabaul and three modern gunboats. The rebels were driven from their redoubt atop the great Sokehs mountain, overlooking Kolonia town, and harried across the interior of the island. Some were captured, some surrendered; ultimately all were taken prisoner. Fifteen leaders were shot and buried in a common grave and more than four hundred people were exiled, first to Yap and then to Palau, for more than a decade. Northern Sokehs was occupied by outer islanders and only the southern area known in general as Palikir remained populated by ethnic Pohnpeians (Ehrlich 1978).

Today, most Pohnpeians exhibit curious ambivalence about this episode. Though it must be reckoned a stunning defeat, it is much more widely remembered (or at least referred to) than the Madolenihmw, Net, and Sokehs victories over the Spaniards in the 1880s and 1890s (Hanlon 1988:148-197; Hempenstall 1984). This is in part because of the epic song and dance composed to record the rebellion. It may also partly be traced to the story's importance as a cautionary tale.

When Pohnpeians fought the Spanish, they succeeded in doing exactly as their mythohistory instructs them: they allowed the Spaniards to remain on the island (mostly hiding inside their fort), having an impact but never exercising much control over life there. The Germans, however, proved entirely too strong for Sokehs; the rest of Pohnpei had foreseen that this would be the case. Instead of finding nonviolent ways of avoiding German domination, and thereby preserving Pohnpeian autonomy in fact if not in appearance, the Sokehs people saw their community destroyed. Defiance is a great deal more attractive when it succeeds.

Throughout the ensuing years, the rebellion against the Germans has remained an important topic of discussion for both Pohnpeian intellectuals and foreign scholars. Accounts of it have been written by Gartzke

(1911), Hambruch (1932-1936), Bascom (1950), Ehrlich (1978), and Hempenstall (1978). Local interpretations of its origins and significance continue to evolve (Petersen 1985:17-18). And the epic song and dance describing it continue to inform much of modern Pohnpeian aesthetics. I have heard or seen bits and pieces of it a number of times but it was not until 1983 that I had an opportunity to see a performance of the epic in its entirety. It was an unforgettable experience.

In June 1983 the Federated States of Micronesia conducted a plebiscite on its Compact of Free Association with the United States. The FSM national government, which had negotiated this compact, was eager to see it approved. The compact provides the Federated States with internal self-government and approximately US\$1.4 billion over the course of fifteen years in return for American oversight of foreign affairs and a "security" arrangement that in fact allows the United States perpetual control over anything it decides is a security issue.

The ethnic Pohnpeian people (as opposed to outer islanders and other Micronesians residing on the island) were not convinced that the compact would provide them with the autonomy they sought. They were troubled by many aspects of the arrangement, including the power it vests in the FSM national government, the possibility it raises of another war being fought in the islands (much of World War II's Pacific Campaign was fought in Micronesia), and its general vagueness about the matter of who was sovereign (that is, who holds the *mana* [Pohnpeian *manaman*], the Americans or the Micronesians). Ethnic Pohnpeians voted by a nearly two-to-one margin against the compact, carrying Pohnpei State, but because theirs was a minority position within the Federated States as a whole, they did not prevail. In an advisory portion of the ballot, they called instead for independence (Petersen 1984, 1985, 1986), an option they still pursue.

Four days after the plebiscite I attended the yearly two-day convocation of Pohnpei's Roman Catholic adult lay sodality (the *Pwihn en Mwanakapw oh Peinakapw*), held in Sewiso, Sokehs. There, groups representing congregations from every part of the island vied with each other, presenting song, dance, and sketches, many of which had religious themes. There were two showstoppers.

The first of these was a long theatrical performance drawn from the Book of Exodus. Its focal point was the repeated request to the Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" A group from Wene, in Kiti, performed it. Coming only four days after Pohnpei had rejected free association with the United States and called instead for independence, no one had trouble grasping its relevance.

The second was the only full performance of the epic “Sokehs Rebellion” song and dance I have ever witnessed. The people of Lewetik, a nearby area, put it on. Many of these performers are descendants of the rebels. Like the Wene group who did the Exodus, they had been practicing for months--the months leading up to the plebiscite, when the compact was the main topic of everyday conversation.

There are seventeen verses in the song, with narration between each. There is much repetition in the course of the dance, and several breaks for movement of the dancers from one formation to another. The performance was a long one. As with most formal Pohnpeian dancing there were lines of sitting women and standing men and women (much like the Samoan *siva*). Several of the men were animated, affecting a traditional clown role, but most of the dancers appeared impassive, even bored, during the performance. This is, however, merely *kanengamah*, the Pohnpeian practice of disguising emotion and interest. A young woman dancer, a daughter of the family I have lived with on and off for fifteen years, told my wife how much pleasure the dancing gave her, how excited she was; I would never have guessed this from the completely detached look on her face.

The performance was given in a feast house, during a downpour. Every inch of space inside was jammed, and scores of people stood outside in the rain. Everyone strained to catch each word, everyone seemed enrapt. But for the song, the dance, and the rain hammering the tin roof, I heard no sounds, a rare circumstance in as raucous a place as Pohnpei.

While Pohnpeians place an extremely high value on disguising and hiding feelings, the words of the song and movements of the dancers carried everyone present through the full sweep of the tragedy. The roundabout phrasings and circumlocutions that are so often a part of everyday Pohnpeian discourse are absent in much of this song, as when the German governor is asked, as he lands in Sokehs on the fateful day, “Do you want to get killed?” Later, during the siege of the Sokehs mountain where the rebels have established themselves, the Pohnpeian phrase *pohn Dollap*, “atop the Great Mountain,” drones repeatedly, with great force, setting the scene for the coming battle between the two forces. When the naval bombardment drives the rebels from their stronghold atop the mountain, their chief asks, “Why do you flee from the Great Mountain?” One of the retreating men replies graphically, “What am I that I should cut/Heavy artillery?”

The performance reaches its mournful climax when the rebel leaders are led to the execution ground, tied to a fence, and shot. The leader of

the rebellion, Soumadau, something of a culture hero in his own right, asks permission for his men to put on their good clothing. "and then we will die." His brother, Lepereren, responds that their palm-leaf skirts are good enough: "These are the clothes of men."

When the men are dead and buried, the drama ends with the simple imperative, "Think about Jesus crucified."³ The audience burst into sustained applause. I confess that I was overwhelmed. I had never expected an opportunity to see such a performance. Coming as it did just days after the Pohnpeians had defied the United States and the FSM's national government, this dance of defiance was doubly powerful, doubly meaningful.

Let me return to the theme of this essay: Sokehs's act of defiance was the act of a localized group of people, like the group performing the dance. It was the people of Sokehs Island (and not even the entire Sokehs chiefdom) who rebelled, not the Pohnpeian people as a whole. They were the ones defending their prerogatives against German encroachments. Current ambivalence in Pohnpei about the uprising makes this clear. Although an act in the finest Pohnpeian warrior tradition, the uprising was ill-starred and, apparently, ill-advised. It is not easy to be unabashedly proud of the episode.

When the Sokehs people perform the epic song and dance, however, they are able to transcend the story's drawbacks. While the tale recounts resistance to foreigners, in the vein of all the accounts I have been citing, it simultaneously tells of their grandparents' decision to defend their community, to act on their own, to assert both the right and the responsibility to act autonomously.

Pohnpeians have managed to defend themselves not by banding together as a centrally organized unit, but through individual acts of individual communities. This, of course, goes thoroughly against the grain of Westerners raised on political classics or in the Euroamerican tradition that draws upon these classics. Americans grow up on "*E Pluribus Unum*" (Out of Many, One) and "United we stand, divided we fall." The *fascis*, the bundle of reeds signifying that in unity there is strength, was borrowed from the Romans not only by Italy's Fascists: it appears on the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., as well.

On one level, then, the Sokehs drama is simply about Sokehs; it belongs to Sokehs, as it were. But on another level, it draws on the format of most Pohnpeian historical drama. When we view this as Pohnpeians speaking to one another, we see them emphasizing the importance of local autonomy. But the examples they use show their people asserting this autonomy against foreigners, thus enabling them to com-

municate very clearly to outsiders that they are fully capable of defending themselves against most outside aggression, and that, when they cannot, they still have tactics for ensuring their eventual success. In this manner, they send multiple, complex messages simultaneously. I think this trick has some important theoretical significance for modern ethnic and nationalist politics.

“Save the Last Dance for Me”

The people of Pohnpei dance for a variety of reasons, many of them having to do with sociability and entertainment. The early reports of European visitors to the island describe dance performances that sound much like those one sees on the island today. Over the years a number of other dance types have been added, including the *lehp*, a favorite. This is a martial dance done in imitation of foreign sailors marching in formation, named for the “left” in “left, right, left.” (Because of the heavy influence of Boston missionaries and New England whalers, English provided most of the the precolonial nineteenth-century loan words.)

Although some outsiders think that the *lehp* corrupts traditional Pohnpeian aesthetics, the Pohnpeians have always looked to the outside world for new ideas. Their dance repertoire continues to grow, and it continues to be militant in character. Since most dancing is done in performance of one sort or another, the topics chosen for entertainment purposes also serve multiple other purposes; some of these are political.

When a political--that is, militant--theme is chosen, several tasks are again undertaken simultaneously. The messages concern both the whole of Pohnpei against the outer world that potentially threatens it and the Pohnpei people against one another. At the risk of stretching a metaphor too far, let me borrow the chorus of an old Drifters’ hit.

Just don’t forget who’s taking you home,
And in whose arms you’re gonna be.
So, darling,
Save the last dance for me.⁴

Precisely because the Pohnpei have been dealing with outsiders since the beginnings of their own mythohistory, they know that foreign influences and forces shall come and go. But other Pohnpeians, they assume, will always be there. Their priority, then, is to assure that (to mix metaphors unconscionably) the center *cannot* hold. Dance performances speak first to the rest of Pohnpei about local autonomy, and only then

about Pohnpei defiant. This insistence on the utility of placing local political needs ahead of grander schemes has a small but honored corner in political theory. It was once articulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *The Government of Poland* (1985).

Rousseau wrote *The Poland*, as it is known, in 1771-1772, in response to the Confederation of Bar's request for help in revising the Polish constitution. His effort came at the time of the first of the three partitions, which removed Poland from the map until World War I. Rousseau foresaw the Poles' fate, and his advice to them was meant to promote their survival as a people at a time when nationalism had not yet appeared as a coherent cause (indeed, *The Poland* is among the earliest documents in the history of modern nationalism). Many of his recommendations to the Poles run parallel to the political theory underpinning Pohnpeian political dance, that brilliant union of the Muses Clio and Terpsichore.

Rousseau saw clearly that the Poles were in no position to repel the Russian, Prussian, and Austrian empires that threatened them. The solution, he believed, was to "establish the republic in the Poles' own hearts . . . those hearts are, to my mind, the republic's only place of refuge" (Rousseau 1985:10). Love of the homeland "may not save you from bowing briefly under the yoke," but "it will, if it keeps on burning in your hearts, burst into flame one day, rid you of the yoke, and make you free" (ibid.:86). This, he recognized, could only be accomplished by preserving Polish culture. "You must maintain or revive (as the case may be) your ancient customs." If they would "see to it that every Pole is incapable of becoming a Russian . . . , Russia will never subjugate Poland" (ibid.:14, 11).

But Rousseau's program was grounded in political as well as cultural theory. At the time, it was widely held that Poland's decentralized political traditions made it vulnerable. Not so, Rousseau argued. "Whatever you do, your enemies will crush you a hundred times before you have given Poland what it needs in order to be capable of resisting them" (ibid. : 11). Instead, the Poles should build on their great history of confederation, which he termed a "political masterpiece" (ibid.:60). He urged upon them "a confederation of thirty-three tiny states," since "almost all small states . . . prosper, simply because they are small" (ibid.:76, 25).

Poland could not resist its neighbors if it merely imitated them. "I should like Poland to be . . . itself, not some other country; for only by being itself will it become all that it is capable of being." In this way the Poles would keep their government and liberty "alive in their true--their only--sanctuary, which is the hearts of Polish citizens" (ibid.:80).

Like Rousseau, the people of Pohnpei--or at least its leading philosophers--recognize that decentralization promotes good government. Certainly their mythology specifies that Pohnpeian civilization is grounded in the autonomy of the chiefdoms. For millennia, Pohnpeians managed to control the foreign influences on their lives--or so they tell themselves. They experimented with political forms and found that the autonomous chiefdoms both allowed the people to govern themselves in small, face-to-face communities *and* guaranteed this freedom from external controls.

Although Pohnpeians were originally advocates of federalism, they have come to believe that this new, centralized nation-state poses a danger to their traditions of local autonomy: They see no value in imitating the American model or in becoming "Micronesians" rather than "Pohnpeians." They keep their government and liberty alive in their hearts--and in their dances.

When they dance, they remind others of their traditions of defiance. In doing so, they continue to uphold the even greater importance of defiant local communities. It is a complex aesthetic but a sensible one. And, if Rousseau and the Poles are any guide, it may yet prove to be a very workable course of action.

NOTES

My research on Pohnpei has been funded by the National Institute of Mental Health. Faculty Research awards from the City University of New York, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Science Foundation, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation. This essay is dedicated to the memories of Dot Pomus and Mort Shuman, the gifted songwriters of "Save the Last Dance for Me" who died while I was completing it.

1. In 1985, after Ponape had officially changed its name to Pohnpei, Governor Resio Moses and his staff explicitly told me that the correct way to refer to the island's people and their language was "the Pohnpei" and "Pohnpei language." They reiterated this position in 1987. In 1990, however, I noticed that official materials originating in the Governor's Office used "Pohnpeian." When I spoke with Governor Moses regarding this, he explained that he had bowed to popular usage: "Pohnpeian" is now official. With this essay, therefore, I mark my own shift to "Pohnpeian" from the adjectival form "Pohnpei."

2. In addition to recalling memories of this Awak triumph, the school's name also evokes the name of Pohnpei itself, which refers to the initial construction of the island out of the seas--"built upon an altar," *pohn pehi*--which, in turn, was set upon a tiny fragment of coral sticking up out of the surface of the water. Moreover, Awak is now a part of the U (the current spelling of which is itself a political maneuver) paramount chiefdom (about which its people feel some ambivalence) and the school's name conveniently begins with the paramount chiefdom's name.

3. The biblical reference in this final passage, like the Exodus performance, reminds us of the continual weaving of foreign themes into accounts of Pohnpei's history. I have used Paul Ehrlich's powerful, and evocative, translation of the chant (1978:169-182), and I gratefully acknowledge the quality of his work.

4. "Save the Last Dance For Me," by Dot Pomus and Mort Shuman, copyright 1960 by Progressive Music.