PULAPESE DANCE: ASSERTING IDENTITY AND TRADITION IN MODERN CONTEXTS

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Dance is a form of communication, an avenue for expressing collective ideas and values (Blacking 1985; Hanna [1979] 1987). Dance can symbolize social relations, gender identity, and core values (Hanna 1988; Kaeppler 1978b, 1985); thus, depending on context, this communication can have political significance. For the people of Pulap, in the outer islands of Micronesia, dance communicates focal themes of identity. Dance performances for interisland audiences assert traditionalism as a symbol of strength and worthiness in the modern world of economic, political, and social upheaval.

Pulap Atoll is part of the State of Chuuk (formerly known as Truk) in the Federated States of Micronesia,[1] a nation now in free association with the United States. Chuuk has been undergoing rapid change: economies are shifting from subsistence to wage labor, young people are pursuing ever-higher levels of formal education, stores are filling with imported goods, power is moving into the hands of an educated elite, and inequalities are growing. But Pulapese have trailed behind other Chuukese. Missionaries reached them far later than they reached other areas of Chuuk. Pulap parents reluctantly sent their children off island for high school a few years later than others did. Their search for new jobs thus also lagged.

Numbering about four hundred, Pulapese are among the least acculturated islanders in the state, and life on the atoll superficially appears little changed. Women wearing lavalavas regularly work their taro gardens, and men still make canoes for fishing and sailing. Women bend low in the presence of their brothers, and matriliny continues to structure relations.

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Nonetheless, life is changing. Many Pulapese are migrating to the port town on Weno (formerly known as Moen), the main island and capital of Chuuk, though usually they view themselves as only tempo.. rary residents in town. Pulapese have formed a migrant community on Weno and consciously keep not only a Pulapese identity but also a way of life they identify as Pulapese. Rather than accept appearing backward and undeserving of an active role in today's Micronesia, Pulapese assert a cultural identity based on being traditional: they contend that they have retained customs that others in Chuuk have abandoned but that nonetheless still represent common core values (Flinn 1990). These efforts are increasingly self-conscious, and some customs asserted as traditional are in fact relatively recent (or have recent elements, such as imported fabric for loincloths), but they symbolize a contrast with other islanders in Chuuk. Pulapese have no wish to be museum specimens, frozen in some timeless past. They see themselves as part of modern Micronesia, certainly as participants in the economic and political changes; and the context in which those changes are taking place includes a "politization of traditional culture" (Nason 1984:446). Especially with the move to internal self-government, material culture and traditional customs in Micronesia have gained attention and value. Thus Pulapese are proud to assert as evidence of their worthiness any practices that symbolize this cultural heritage.

One avenue of assertion is dance. At times the Pulapese perform only for themselves, but on Weno they often have a far wider audience, potentially all of Chuuk State. The dance performances on Weno thus contain political overtones. Although performances today differ from those in the past, Pulapese nonetheless manage to present them as traditional. Tradition is construed and asserted in the present for current purposes, often in the pursuit of prestige, recognition, or power. Encoded in Pulapese dance are messages about the kind of people the Pulapese are and the sources of their strength, with the implication that they deserve respect and a position in contemporary. Micronesia. These are people pursuing many of the new opportunities for schooling, jobs, material goods, and political offices but at the same time practicing customs they assert as evidence of traditionalism.

Dance in the Pre-Christian Context

When Pulapese dance today, they draw upon beliefs about an old and valued corpus of dances. Islanders performed daily before missionary activities discouraged dancing in the early years of the American

administration in the late 1940s. As Pulapese put it, "In the old days, we danced with the seasons." During breadfruit season, men performed vigorous, energetic dances; during the off-season, a more sedate style prevailed, with both men and women dancing.

These dances had their own political nuances. Dances during the off-season served in part to control the harvesting of coconuts, taro, and other staple foods. This season is known as *le yefeng,* "starvation time." Breadfruit was in the past and is still available only seasonally? during the summer, though the islanders preserve some of it for use in the off-season. The style of dance used for controlling the use of off-season staples is a seated style called *yawanú,* "stop coconuts." Although the label refers only to coconuts, Pulapese understand it as applying to staple foods in general. The idea was to keep people from picking coconuts and taro, except in set areas at appointed times, and to ensure that they subsisted instead on greens and other foods planted near the houses. During this period they danced both in the early afternoon and in the evening. Pulapese say the chief and the council watched the people to be sure they kept away from the forbidden areas.

During these off-season dances, women danced first, followed by the men. Both groups sat in rows, with children in front, older people toward the back. Many dances were accompanied by love songs, and Pulapese added to their repertoire several songs collected from elsewhere in Chuuk.

The style of dance associated with the breadfruit season is known as *wúú maaw,* "stand strong." Dancers would begin performing these dances about a month before the onset of the breadfruit season. Part of their purpose was to develop men's physical strength in preparation for the work of the coming season. Women sat as an audience, though they participated in the singing that accompanied the movements. The dance was like a drill, performed in circles, with the youngest in the inner circles. The men started with seated dances--perhaps ten or twenty--and then they stood and danced with more lively, energetic movements and vigorous jumping. The dancing was both an exhibition of strength and a way of exercising to gain the fortitude necessary for climbing trees and for fishing--trapping, netting, and deep diving. Then, when preserved breadfruit ran out, the Pulapese returned to the more sedate dancing of *yawanú.*

Pulapese take pride in their knowledge of the composers of these dances. Names of composers, those who created dance, tune, and words, are handed down along with a dance. For some dances, composers created a whole set of accompanying songs on a theme and titled the

entire set. One popular set is *patú,* referring to a type of mackerel important to Pulapese. Today, they may dance a selected piece of the larger work rather than the entire set.

Despite schooling and conversion to Christianity, Pulapese have faith in the historical accuracy of the stories behind these dances, even when they concern magic or sorcery. These stories contribute to pride about their strength. For example, one cycle that has to do with *patú* tells of a woman who was a skilled magician, a woman who could call the school of fish to the island with chants. In her honor, dances were created. But these songs also tell of how the woman became angry one day, after visiting cookhouses where other women were working, preparing her fish. As they wrapped the fish in leaves to place in the ovens, they were complaining, "We still have fish; why is she still calling fish every day?" Indignant, the woman then vowed to stop the fish for ten generations. For a long period of time, then, no one saw the fish. They could only dance and sing of the *patú* that had deserted them. Then, late in the 1940s, the fish supposedly came back, signaling the end of the ten generations. Pulapese believe they can date the composition and the original event by going back ten generations.

Another example of continuing belief in magic powers concerns a dance composed during World War II about the death at sea of a Pulapese man. During the war, Pulapese caught in Chuuk Lagoon were evacuated to the island of Udot. A Pulap man became drunk and sailed off in a canoe and was lost. Communication between Pulapese in Chuuk Lagoon and on the atoll was cut off at the time, yet on Pulap a *waytawa,* someone who could be possessed by a spirit, learned of the disaster from a spirit and composed a dance about the event. Pulapese then performed it. Those present included the lost man's mother, herself a *waytawa,* as well as spirits who joined them in the meetinghouse to watch. The mother had not yet learned, however, about the death of her son. During the dance, the spirit of her son arrived. Other *waytawa* could see him, but the spirits managed to hide enough of her son's spirit body so that the mother only saw below the knees. Yet that was enough --the mother recognized her son. These stories come to mind when Pulapese dance, and though proud of their conversion to Catholicism and their modern rejection of sorcery, they express pride in past exploits that provide evidence of strength--including supernatural strength.

In addition to the daily dances, Pulapese also danced for special occasions. One type of dance celebrated a large fish catch from a school swimming past the island. Informants say women danced in the same general style as for a seasonal dance, but some might exaggerate their

movements, adding more licentious words and motions, even in the presence of brothers for whom they normally had to show more decorum. Dedicating a canoe house was another occasion for dancing. When men worked putting up poles, frames, posts, and beams, women danced *yapelirá,* "making the wood lighter." Singing to the wood supposedly lightened the load. Then while the men put a roof on, the women again came, making the thatch panels for the roof while singing and dancing. Inauguration of a new chief, initiation of navigators, and interisland gatherings provided other occasions for dancing.

Missionary disapproval called a halt to the dancing in the late 1940s. Along with many other customs, dancing was labeled pagan. Eventually, however, the Pulapese lobbied for distinctions between pagan activities and traditional customs. Traditional customs came to include many of the dances, except explicitly sexual ones. Pulapese today dance only for public feasts and celebrations, not daily. Their practice nonetheless shows some continuity with the past, when they also danced for special events. But instead of celebrating initiations of navigators, today's contexts include religious holidays, church dedications, and visits from important dignitaries. What originally, was pagan now frequently celebrates Christian events. Despite these changes, however, Pulapese dance performances resonate with themes from their past. When Pulapese perform today, their dances signify their heritage, which includes both their past strengths as well as their current worthiness. This current worthiness in their minds is based on retention of valued ways.

Pulapese Dance in the Modern Context

In a deliberate move to resurrect old customs--or rather, old ways as they are perceived today--the Pulapese have discussed resuming daily dancing. Although Pulapese value old customs, at the same time they clearly want to fit them into the modern context, complete with its constraints and opportunities. In particular, some Pulapese have voiced concerns about *yawanú*--"stop coconuts"--because they are reluctant now to allow clan leaders to control their harvest. Their concerns may be due in part to their having become acquainted with Western notions of authoritarian leadership and their making the assumption that their clan leaders followed--and would in the future follow--such a model of leadership. In addition, they have less need today to regulate food production and consumption because of outside aid from the United States and the availability of imported food. Furthermore, even those

most in favor of daily *yawanú* want to avoid any dances the church would disapprove of.

Some Pulapese suggest resurrecting only the *wúú maaw,* "stand strong." They contend this would be traditional, even though these dances comprise only a portion of the old works and represent only one season. Furthermore, the Pulapese want to see the dances integrated into the modern context that involves both schooling and church activities. A major question is the seemingly simple one of what time during the day to dance, because of potential conflicts with morning church services, afternoon rosary, and school classes. No one suggests abandoning any of these modern activities to make time for dance, despite the Pulapese contention that they should keep their old customs. Instead, they interpret the way they dance today to be traditional.

The dances are public performances that take place at a variety of public occasions. Participation is broadly based; all Pulapese are welcome, even encouraged, to join dance practices and performances. But there is also a distinct audience focus, whether that audience be other Pulapese, when dancing takes place on the home atoll, or other Chuukese, when dancing is part of other island festivities. On Weno, Pulapese participate in contexts that often involve the entire state. Two occasions I observed were the inauguration of the governor in July 1986 and the dedication of a church in July 1989.

Today Pulapese are known in Chuuk for their dancing. Frequently public officials, church leaders, or private individuals on Weno ask them to perform during public festivities; Pulapese, more than any other islanders, including their neighbors, with whom they share many customs, are specifically asked to perform. These are occasions, then, for public assertions of Pulapese identity through dance.

First, the Pulapese contend that their dances--unlike those performed by other Chuukese--are traditional, following their old customs. Dance leaders select many of the old seasonal dances, with traditional movements, words, and melodies. In contrast, dances other islanders perform are much more recent and often adopted from other groups. In the face of outside pressures, the Pulapese contend, other Chuukese abandoned their old ways, but they have successfully resisted some of these changes. There is an implicit message concerning their strength, the strength to maintain their old ways as well as the strength implied in the stories of battle, navigation, fishing, and sorcery (see also Petersen, this volume).

Despite these claims regarding tradition, however, some of the dances Pulapese perform were originally acquired from other Chuukese, who

later ceased to perform them. Thus, rather than taking traditional custom to mean behavior passed down intact, unchanged through generations, Pulapese assert as traditional custom what other islanders do not do or no longer do. Furthermore, not all the dances are old. Many are recent compositions, complete with Western-style melodies.

These very departures signal other aspects of Pulapese assertions about their continuing to practice valued customs. The islanders contend they enriched their song and dance repertoire by borrowing from others--without abandoning any of their own songs. Today, when they dance these borrowed compositions, they say that other Chuukese watch and realize, presumably with envy, that they used to perform those songs and dances themselves. Furthermore, the contexts of adopting these other forms further enhance their Pulapese identity. They are proud of being good sailors and navigators, and they adopted songs and dances from contact with these other islanders. Several other dances they acquired when men worked at forced labor with Germans or Japanese; those who returned came back with reputations of strength and tales of adventure. The image of strength is critical for Pulapese, so the songs resonate with allusions to strength. What is traditionally Pulapese today is not so much what was Pulapese in the past as it is what others no longer do.

Furthermore, Pulapese on occasion dance *maas* (march), a style recently adopted from others and still shared with them. And many songs have English, German, or Japanese words. But again, Pulapese see no contradiction: they enriched their repertoire, supposedly without losing their other dances, and they contend they are more skilled than others even in the dances they share. When they dance for other Chuukese, however, they tend to rely more on dances they believe others no longer perform.

Pulapese also perform other types of new dances, again in seeming contradiction to their claims of traditionalism. All of the new ones at the church dedication in July 1989 were performed by women. Most of the new dances had accompanying songs that honored the bishop, a native Micronesian. A few dances celebrated other important islanders as well. Though ostensibly new, composed for the occasion or revised from older forms, the dances and songs can nonetheless be construed and presented as traditional: they are of the type that women traditionally compose--those that honor children and relatives and express strong emotion and nurturance for those they honor. They thus retain traditional gender roles and imagery: men sing of heroic past events, women of their close emotional attachments.

The male and female dances illustrate Pulap cultural notions about other behaviors appropriate to the genders. Men dance together with other men--as they tend to work and socialize with other men. Women dance with other women, as they, too, work and socialize primarily with their female kin. The dances reflect gender ideology, as women dance roles in which they are caring and nurturing, especially of their kin, and men's dances reflect strength, bravery, and male interests such as fishing and navigation. Concern for kin rather than individualism, nurturing and caring for others rather than pursuing personal renown, and emphasis on traditional subsistence and navigation rather than dependence on money and machines are aspects of Pulapese traditionalism that they present with pride. Pulapese contend that others in Chuuk have become selfish and individualistic, and seduced by money.

Pulapese deride other islanders, especially more-acculturated Chuukese, for lacking both unity and generosity--others have come to rely on money and have supposedly lost their self-sufficiency and willingness to share with kin. Pulapese place a high value on cooperation and unity, as often expressed in reciprocity among kin, community feasts, and patterns of redistribution with regard to a fishing catch or island feast. Furthermore, humility, modesty, and self-effacement, especially for women, and an emphasis on group concerns rather than individual ones are highly valued behavioral traits. These are reflected and reinforced in the dance. Performers dance as a group, with all of them dancing and singing together. A single dancer--recognized as knowledgeable in the dance--may begin the accompanying song, but the voice does not continue to stand out or dominate the others.

On Weno, Pulapese practice their dances in a new meetinghouse built on land purchased by some Pulapese leaders that supports the core of their migrant community. The meetinghouse symbolizes their unity on Weno. The Pulapese rehearse their dances and songs in a common, open area, with others, natives of Weno or other islands, scattered around to watch.

When practice begins for some public performance, all able-bodied Pulapese are encouraged to participate--another sign of unity. Yet the encouragement is noncoercive, nonauthoritarian. Leaders exhort all to participate but respect decisions not to. Reasons given for not participating include physical problems or inadequate time for practicing; they even respect vague words of reluctance.

Typically, men or women march in with a dance and song and then sit in rows and dance seated for the first portion of the performance. During this part, a few may stand in the middle of a dance not as solo

performers, but singing and moving with the others. Usually the more skilled dancers choose to rise this way briefly; however, their performance enhances the group image, rather than showcasing the individual's special talents.

The costumes convey similar themes. Dancers all wear similar clothing and decorations, with no one dancer trying to outshine the others with special finery. Pulapese proudly assert that their dress is traditional, again constructing a tradition in the present. Men wear loincloths and women wear wraparound lavalavas--the symbol of traditional dress in contrast with Western dress. Pulapese are among the few Chuukese who still wear this style, but typically the loincloth and lavalava are lengths of imported cloth purchased from stores in town. Red is the most popular color--a traditional favorite. Some women still weave loincloths and lavalavas on backstrap looms, a skill Pulapese are proud of, but even then they usually use imported crochet cotton. On the rare occasions when they use hibiscus fiber--for an anthropologist or a tourist--ditto masters provide a popular dye!

The leader of the women (who is also of the chiefly clan, which gives her additional influence) encourages the women to dance topless--the traditional Pulapese way. But, again following custom, she will not force anyone to do so who would feel uncomfortable. Pulapese women on Weno are increasingly reluctant to appear topless; they risk being embarrassed rather than proud. So traditional dancing on Weno may be done wearing a halter.

Flowers, beads, and coconut-frond ornaments complete the costumes. But the beads and sometimes even the flowers are store-bought imports. The message, however, remains one of tradition, attachment to old Pulap ways of life, and a continuing connection with the land of Pulap, even in the port town.

From Dance to Politics

The songs and dances taken from elsewhere in Chuuk also clearly connect the Pulapese with other Chuukese. Pulapese want to be part of the larger political and economic scene, not isolated from it. These dances send the message that they have always been connected with other places, never isolated, and continue to be vital participants in interisland activities. Thus they assert rights to new educational opportunities, jobs, material goods, and political offices. Dance is one mechanism for communicating this message to others as Pulapese strive to survive and succeed in modern Micronesia. The assertions of traditionalism and

the valuing of old customs must be understood to be oriented toward contemporary goals as well, with tradition defined relative to competing patterns, not as behavior passed down unchanged from earlier generations.

Contemporary goals of Pulapese include a Western-style education. Youth in Chuuk are encouraged to obtain at least a high school diploma. A number of young people now continue beyond high school for some college education. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, most Pulapese sought degrees from U.S. mainland colleges, but now Pulapese are more likely to choose Guam or schools within Micronesia itself. Related to the desire for schooling, Pulapese want jobs that will bring a cash income. Consequently, the community of Pulapese working, attending school, or looking for jobs on Weno is growing. Pulapese are beginning to acquire more consumer goods: TVs, VCRs, refrigerators, fans, air conditioners, and even some furniture. Even at home on the atoll, where the economy is still based essentially on subsistence horticulture and fishing, interest in cash is escalating. Many are building homes from imported materials, fishing is being developed as a cash product, and recently Pulapese even purchased a boat to ferry passengers and cargo in and out of Weno. Pulapese take an active interest in state political affairs out of a concern for their island's interests. They either run their own candidates or exert personal influence on those from neighboring islands to represent their own interests.

All these changes threaten a valued way of life, especially apparent as Pulapese see their impact on other, far more acculturated islanders. As all of Micronesia grapples with its future, islanders seek to define what is Micronesian--traditional yet suitable for the modern context. Pulapese see themselves as living representatives of much of the tradition others have lost and thus critical to the efforts of the state and even the larger Micronesian entity.

NOTE

1. According to the Chuuk State Legislature, the official spelling of "Pulap" is now "Pollap." Micronesians are in the process of transliterating place names to reflect indigenous pronunciations rather than foreign misperceptions.