

# Dancing with the Flow: Political Undercurrents at the 9<sup>th</sup> Festival of Pacific Arts

by

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## ABSTRACT

*In 2004, the Festival of Pacific Arts, held every four years since 1972, was hosted by the Republic of Palau in Micronesia with its 16 states and population of less than 20,000. An unique system of community organisation, based on Palauan concepts of traditional leadership and hospitality, placed each of the 28 country delegations from all over the Pacific into the care of a Palauan « sister state » and volunteer committees set up according to topic (dance, theatre, music, healing workshops, and so on). The heavy cost of this festival, held 22-31 July, and the incredible local commitment to this event, seemed like a modern potlatch, challenging not so much the indigenous guests but the diverse powers competing in the Pacific (USA, Japan, France, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, New Zealand, and Australia).*

**KEYWORDS:** *Indigenous networks, festivals, identity, intangible heritage, Palau, Japan, Taiwan.*

## RÉSUMÉ

*En 2004, le Festival des Arts du Pacifique, organisé tous les quatre ans depuis 1972, fut accueilli par la République de Palau en Micronésie qui comprend seize États pour une population de moins de 20 000 habitants. Un système original d'organisation communautaire, fondé sur des concepts palauans de leadership et d'hospitalité traditionnels, plaça chacune des vingt-huit délégations de divers pays du Pacifique sous la responsabilité d'un « État sœur » de Palau et de comités de bénévoles mis en place autour de différents thèmes (danse, théâtre, musique, ateliers de soins, etc.). Le coût élevé de ce festival qui dura du 22 au 31 juillet et l'incroyable engagement de cet événement semblaient un potlatch moderne, défiant moins les invités autochtones que les divers pouvoirs qui sont en compétition dans le Pacifique (USA, Japon, France, Chine, Taiwan, Indonésie, Nouvelle-Zélande et Australie).*

**MOTS-CLÉS :** *réseaux autochtones, festivals, identité, patrimoine intangible, Palau, Japon, Taïwan.*

The Festival of Pacific Arts provides an excellent opportunity for research on how social networks are used in festival contexts to navigate the interests of small island states, as well as to harness and balance forces of globalisation, including the contemporary political interests of bigger state powers competing in the Pacific (USA, Japan, France, China, Taiwan, Indonesia,

*New Zealand, and Australia*). Political undercurrents at the 2004 festival hosted in July by the tiny island Republic of Palau in Micronesia relate to the signing of a Compact of Free Association with the United States, in exchange for independence in 1994. The first colonial power in the Pacific to officially control Palau was Spain, after Pope Leo XIII asserted Spanish

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rights over the Caroline Islands in 1885. However, Spain did not do much more than establish a mission station in Palau. Fourteen years later, in 1899, Spain sold its rights to Germany, which ruled until the beginning of WWI. The islands were then ceded under the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, to Japan, which established Palau (Koror) as the administrative centre of all its possessions in the South Pacific. When Japan was defeated in WWII, Palau became part of a United Nations Trust Territory. Rather than join the Federated States of Micronesia, after the United Nations Trust Territory of the Pacific under US administration was dissolved, Palauans opted for independence in 1978. A Compact of Free Association with the US was approved in 1986. However, the Compact was not ratified until 1993, and only entered into force after independence in 1994.

The Compact, which was heavily resisted by many Palauans during the 1980's, guarantees Palau approximately \$700 million in US aid over 15 years in return for military facilities for 50 years. After talking with many Palauans during the festival, we came to the understanding that Palau offered to host the Festival partly as a platform for testing the sustainability of Palau as a sovereign nation within a Pacific solidarity network. We were very impressed by the way Palauans at all levels of the population (20 000<sup>1</sup>), expressed a concern to find a « Pacific Way » model to deal with the impending end of US Aid under the Compact. The Festival theme *Nurture, Regenerate, Celebrate* specifically invited the delegations from 27 Pacific Island countries, not only to express cultural strength through dance and art, but also to discuss issues of economic sustainability and strategies for resisting the agenda of the big state powers, both Western and Asian. Representatives of these powers were present at the Festival in full action with specific celebrations staged to acknowledge gifts of aid – the Japanese funding of a bridge, the Chinese funding of a new cultural centre, the French contribution to the Museum, and so on.

Three thousand people were hosted as part of the 27 Pacific delegations from American Samoa, Australia, Cook Islands, Easter Island (Chile), Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji Islands, French Polynesia, Guam, Hawaii, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Norfolk Island, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Pitcairn Island, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Toke-

lau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Wallis and Futuna. In addition there were *invited* guest performances by a dance group from Japan and by indigenous groups from Taiwan. The Taiwanese government representative stressed Taiwan's Pacific links by introducing the indigenous Taiwanese as living representatives of the original Austronesians, and Taiwan as the birth place of prehistoric Austronesian migrations throughout the Pacific. At stake here was Taiwan's agenda to gain United Nations support from Pacific countries for its claim for independence from China.

There was also an *uninvited* group from west Irian Jaya, who were given special permission to perform after they had turned up unexpectedly. The first time they danced, small Indonesian flags were unfurled by the dancers as part of their finale. We were told that although Indonesia and the Philippines had expressed an interest in sending official delegations, the Board of the Pacific Arts Council had denied them permission to participate in the Festival. This was framed in terms of a debate about what constituted the Pacific and which peoples could be accepted as genuine practitioners of the « Pacific Way ». This Pacific exclusivity was conveyed not only in the context of performances at the festival but also through the local newspaper *Tia Belau* and the festival website.

The cultural and political aspects of Palauan hospitality were strikingly in evidence during the festival. At the official opening and closing ceremonies, not only the official delegations, but also all visitors to the festival were provided with food. Thousands of people were invited to feast on pre-packed meals consisting of rice, fish, chicken, beef, taro, and tapioca; and bottled water was freely distributed. In classical Palauan society feasts (*mur*) constituted political displays and were a factor in the success of a chief. Large amounts of food redistributed during such a feast enhanced the reputation of the host for generosity and hospitality and this contributed to his/her political status (Palau Community Action Agency, 1976: 66). Not only did the festival demand substantial capital investment (one figure cited was \$4 million) but it also required the harnessing of human resources in the form of a large volunteer labour force. How was this done?

Palauan women, particularly titleholders within the matrilineal system, played a critical

1. July 2004 estimate : The World Factbook <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ps.html>

role in the organisation of the Festival<sup>2</sup>. As Kathy Keseloi, a Palauan anthropologist and Chair of «Team Palau», stated:

« We decided to follow the traditional way of organising ourselves...women leaders of the 16 states of Palau took the role of executing the decisions all on a voluntary basis.» (ICTM meeting, 1 Aug., 2004)

Each of the visiting delegations was linked, as a «sister State», with one of the 16 Palauan States<sup>3</sup>. They were allocated neighbouring booths in the festival village, and it was the responsibility of Palauans from each State to look after them. The women organised this through their traditional women's clubs, a complex tradition involving competitive public works. According to Barnett (1949: 171) in the past all individuals were divided into groups on the basis of their membership of these clubs. The clubs were divided according to gender. Each club had a name and the number of clubs varied according to the history of the village community. Barnett notes that the ideal was to have at least 2 men's and 2 women's clubs in each village in order to balance the group of age mates in one club against those of another. « This division of clubs into moieties was called *bital taod ma bital taod* », which literally means « on the (one) side of the stream and on the (other) side of the stream » (Barnett, 1949: 171; see also Parmentier, 1986 and Smith, 1983: 18 who uses the spelling *bital taoch* and notes that *taoch* literally means « a mangrove channel »). Historically these clubs would perform public works and compete with one another to do so<sup>4</sup>. The women's clubs merged as major actors in local and international debates surrounding Palau's political future and US military proposals (as well analysed by Lynn Wilson 1995). Some of the women Wilson worked with were sent to jail for their opposition to the Compact.

The Ngarachamayong women's organization, headed by the traditional woman leader of Koror, Bilung Gloria Salii, who is the sister of Paramount Chief of Koror, and was referred to by the Palauans and other Pacific Islanders as the Queen of Koror, organized the women's and girl's dance performances for the festival. This women's club, a group of women elders living in

Koror (but from all the different States of Palau) had started a series of annual women's conferences over 12 years ago, to consider ways of preserving Palauan culture and traditions. The celebration of a birthing ceremony for the launch of the new Cultural Centre, named after the women's club, brought their vision to fruition. The cultural centre and the new museum demonstrate the wish of Palauans to try to control tourism in a way that strengthens transmission of heritage. This is envisaged as an economic alternative for the town of Koror, which faces impending removal of all government functions and associated agencies to a brand new Capital being built in Melekeok, a confederation of Palauan States that is in competition with Koror. Koror and Melekeok were already the centres of two competing confederacies at the time of European contact in 1783. This competition was observed and ethnographically described by Jan Stanislaw Kubary, a Polish geographer and ethnologist who lived in Palau during 1871-1872 (Wypych, 1969; Parmentier, 2002).

An architecture exhibition held at the festival in Palau emphasised the importance of the Palau men's house (*bai*) as a symbol of the whole society and culture based on the concept *waa* «two», which also means feet and footprints. *Waa* is understood as the balance of a double structure, the two sides of the *bai*, also signifying two kingdoms and two chambers in the government. The clans in each of the Palauan states are referred to by even and uneven numbers and are required to sit on opposite sides of the *bai* and assist each other. A similar double structure can be seen in all Palauan dancing which is done in two rows like a canoe. This duality was also the theme and the structure of the choreography performed by the school students for the opening of the festival: they arrived in two lines, forming two circles to represent first the two kingdoms, then Palau versus the other Pacific Islands as their guests to be nurtured, regenerated and celebrated, in line with the theme of the Festival.

According to Parmentier (1986: 163), while the earliest Western visitors to Palau recorded the existence of a dualistic pan-Palauan polity focused on the villages of Koror and Melekeok,

2. There is much debate in the literature regarding the matrilineal nature of Palauan social organisation and the actual influence and political power of women (see Barnett, 1949; Force & Force, 1972; Smith, 1983). Smith (1983: 30) argues that the key principle for understanding Palauan social organisation is 'cross-siblingship'. See Wilson (1995) for a recent discussion of male and female domains of power.

3. The 16 States of Palau: Aimeliik, Airai, Angaur, Hatobohei, Kayangel, Koror, Melekeok, Ngaraard, Ngarchelong, Ngardmau, Ngatpang, Ngchesar, Ngeremlengui, Ngiwal, Peleliu, Sonsoral. See the official website : [www.festival-pacific-arts.org/Festival.html](http://www.festival-pacific-arts.org/Festival.html).

4. See Palau Community Action Agency (1976: 54-61) and Wilson (1995) for further discussion of the structure and function of clubs in Palauan society.

Palauan myths and historical narratives describe an original quadripartite order. In terms of Palauan cosmology, the relationship between Koror and Melekeok was conceptualised in terms of a competition between two «sides of heaven» (*bita el eanged*) (see also Smith, 1983: 31). Parmentier (1985: 846) argues that the historical intensification of hostility between Koror and Melekeok can directly be linked to the impact of colonial interests and the importation of Western goods, particularly guns. At the festival, the canoe opening ceremony provided insights into this competitive relationship and delicate balance of power. It was attended by the leaders of all the States of Palau except for Melekeok. We were told by several Palauans after the ceremony that the Paramount Chief Reklei of Melekeok had boycotted the ceremony because, although protocol demanded it, the Melekeok canoe had not been invited to open the event. However, several other Palauans explained that the canoe did not go for the opening ceremony because there was a crack in the hull that could not be repaired in time. The President of the Senate gave us the following interpretation:

«[some] people say it was a crack, others say it was a political conflict between the two [chiefdoms], the North and the South. Well we can only speculate. It is just a crack.»

One might be tempted to interpret this conflict situation at the festival as an expression of the traditional status competition between the two «sides of heaven», Koror and Melekeok. However, it would be a mistake to explain the continuing competition between these two confederacies merely in these terms, without considering the impact of, and responses to, competitive interests and agendas in the Pacific today and the contemporary demands of a political system requiring an elected government that threatens the authority of the chiefs.

The dances performed by the young Palauan teams at the festival expressed this duality within the Palauan polity. Each of the teams (men women and girls) danced in two rows as in a canoe, and according to their clan rank<sup>5</sup>. The division of the team down the middle into two groups facing each other during the dance was said to represent «the two cultural and historical

federations of states in Palau under the two Paramount chiefs Ibedul of Koror and Reklei of Melekeok». On the one hand the dance performances could be read as showcasing the concept of traditional social structure, leadership and governance, in counterpoint to more recently introduced Western forms. On the other hand, in the light of the canoe incident, the dance performances could be read as expressions of a contemporary dynamics of power in play today and a continuing competition between the two Paramount chiefs as they attempt to harness and balance flows of global capital in Palau.

#### Performances of categorical identities and issues of cultural heritage

At the festival, old colonial categories (Melanesian/Polynesian/Micronesian) were appropriated by the performers to be celebrated as categories of cultural exchange. Thus the festival performances become a means of mediating difference within a connected web of relations (the Pacific way)<sup>6</sup>. Performances mine the past to deal with political relations in the present. There were numerous references to migrations (flows of people, objects and ideas), common ancestry, and so on, but also an emphasis on differences.

«We make up the Polynesian element [...]. We offer a contrast to the dancing style of our Fijian brothers and sisters [...] where theirs are very warrior like and vigorous, ours is different [...]. Because of our isolation we were hardly influenced by other migrating patterns of Polynesians and the rest of the great Asian migration [...] so ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the Polynesian side of our great Fijian nation, the Rotuman group [...].»

At the festival two claims were in productive tension with one another. The first was that Pacific peoples (whether, Micronesian, Polynesian or Melanesian) are all connected by the Pacific Way, a particular *way* or style of doing things and a *pathway* of exchange relations via movement through a connected seascape (as represented by the emphasis on canoes and navigation)<sup>7</sup>. The other was a claim that cultural differences have to be maintained (movement halted and

5. The dancers represented the two highest clans of each state. Representatives from clans 1, 3, 5, 7 & 9 danced as Clan 1 (i.e. as representatives of the first ranking chiefdom) and representatives from Clans 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 danced as Clan 2 (i.e. as representatives of the second ranking chiefdom). This is also, how the 10 chiefs are organised in the men's house (*bai*). See Palau Community Action Agency (1976: 46).

6. In a series of newspaper articles, subsequently published as a book entitled *The Melanesian Way*, the politician Bernard Narakobi defined the Melanesian way as «a total cosmic vision of life in which every event within human consciousness has its personal, communal, spiritual, economic, political and social dimensions» (Narakobi, 1980: 20).

7. See Parmentier (1985: 141) for a discussion of the Palauan concept of path as «a "way" of doing something», but also as a means of establishing «linkages, relationships, and associations among persons, groups, and political units which were created

cultural flows/currents controlled) through the recognition of cultural property rights and heritage, particularly in the face of globalization, and in response to the appropriative tendencies of powerful nation-states, or peoples, that are considered **not** Pacific.

For example, the invited Japanese performance was introduced and announced at the festival as a « unique cultural sharing performance ». The dance style is called Nanyo-Odori (South Seas Dance) and was presented as being an adaptation of the songs and dances from the Pacific brought back to the Ogasawaran islands of Japan by Japanese people who had sailed around the Pacific for trading, not to mention that thousands of Japanese had actually lived in Micronesia, during the period of Japanese occupation and control before and during WWII (Konishi, 2005). The dance is an adaptation of a Micronesian dance, called the Matamatong, a version of which was performed by a team of Palauan women elders at the festival. The dance, which was accompanied by songs in a mixture of Palauan, Japanese and English, is said to have been created in about 1914 at the end of the German era in Micronesia, and continues to be popularly danced today. The Japanese group appeared to be well received by the audience when they first performed outdoors on the festival stage. However, the group performed again after the festival at a meeting of the International Council of Traditional Music Study Group on the Music of Oceania<sup>8</sup>. The presentation raised debate regarding issues of cultural appropriation and intellectual property. What was disturbing to some participants was the revelation that the Tokyo Metropolitan government had certified the dance (in the year 2000) as « intangible cultural treasure » of the Osagawaran Islands of Japan. A fascinating exchange ensued between Palauans at the meeting and the Japanese performers, in which they compared the dance steps of the Nanyo-Odori with those of the Matamatong (as well as the words of the accompanying songs, some of which the Japanese did not understand)<sup>9</sup>. A Palauan musician, composer of the Festival song, Roland Tangelbad, noted that the Japanese still danced the old way, with a German soldier's style of marching step (goose step) whereas the Palauans had since adapted theirs to the marching step of the US

soldiers. He argued that sharing/borrowing is ok if it is acknowledged (in other words if you cite your sources) on stage. The case raises interesting questions regarding the concept of heritage and how one defines ownership of heritage. Whose heritage is this dance and what happens to bodily movement when it becomes fixed as intangible heritage? Who benefits from the ownership of heritage and intellectual property rights? Heritage claims are one means by which small Pacific States attempt to negotiate and mediate the delicate balance of global interests in the region.

### **Intangible Heritage or how to share inalienable possessions**

A Yolngu elder from Northern Australia, Joe Neparrnga Gumbula, who witnessed the Palau/Japanese exchange at the festival and at the ICTM workshop, contributed his understanding of cultural sharing across the Pacific:

«Looking at South Pacific, coconut brought by West wind just float to our land, we pick it up on the beach from the ocean. Never mind that we are not faring for sea; there is a chain from Papua New Guinea, and in Cape York Peninsula. That's when we dance for the coconut movement [...]. We play the part of the ocean move, underneath the current, and openly.»

Joe Gumbula stood up to show us a dance movement of the Yolngu Gumatj clan, open arms and a tap on his elbow, and then continued:

«We use the same paddle as well. But the paddle when we dream is the horizon of the cloud forming, when the cloud is low on the surface of the horizon, it's already getting up, that's how our pattern works [...]. So current is the main route, the main story. This is only from my view. But this is how the songline works. And actually what we are talking about here is traditional: the song series, the dance and all that, but only the copyright is problematic: somebody talks about "you don't take my song". And that's only what I am thinking looking at how I look at the Pacific Ocean here, the current movement.»

A passionate response to Joe Gumbula's statement came from Pacific anthropologist and dancer Dr Katerina Teaiwa, who is currently Pacific Studies Convener at the Australian National University<sup>10</sup>:

by some precedent-setting action in the past and which imply the possibility as well as the obligation for "following the path" in exchange, marriage, cooperation, and competition».

8. See Report on the meeting by Flores (2004).

9. The Japanese did not understand some of the song words accompanying their dance as some of the words were in Chuukese. See Konishi Junko (2003, 2005).

10. See also Teaiwa (2005).

«You are saying that there are currents which bring things to your shore, and other currents that go from your shore to other shores. These are currents that flow and crisscross, and they meet at other intersections [...]. Things that arrive to your shore are reinterpreted, reconstructed and of course they are meaningful [...] because they land on your shores. So it's not that you stole or borrowed something because it flows to your shores. That's a very important point and it's important to talk about it in that way and not just lump things as identity, or culture or tradition. Like you said, it's process and there are lines and currents that connect [...].»

Apart from music and dance, issues of intellectual property rights were a hot issue during the Festival. A kiosk was set in the middle of the festival village to encourage musicians from different delegations to play together. The idea of the Palauan hosts was to record a live CD out of all these musical meetings but during a firing copyright workshop it was decided that the process was too complex because some songs were already copyrighted. Interestingly, a woman from Jamaica reminded everybody at the workshop that if Reggae was copyrighted nobody would be able to play it and she encouraged all the musicians to look for a « horizontal » Pacific and Caribbean market rather than always looking at a « vertical » distribution in Europe and North America.

Another issue for intangible heritage is the status of the knowledge of plants. Since 2001, the Palauan Health Minister has gathered Palauan traditional healers on several occasions to discuss the possibilities for commercialisation of plants as a mean for sustainable development. According to Charlene Melrsau, a Palauan biology student who coordinated a workshop on traditional healing practices, introduced for the first time at the Festival in Palau, while some of the healers were ready to share their knowledge, others were against the idea of medicinal plants being commercialised. Only a few delegates – especially a Maori man, a Lifou Kanak couple and a woman from Vanuatu – were able to demonstrate how they could make a living out of their traditional healing knowledge.

In all the Palau Festival forums, performances, stalls and corners, while differences were celebrated, encompassing relatedness was emphasized and creativity was encouraged through exchange relations (the Pacific way). The television coverage of the events was also subject to an experimental self-empowerment scheme: a media team of Indigenous people from eight countries came to train before the

festival. The hundreds of hours shot everyday by small teams were instantly edited and events and interviews were transmitted live during the whole week of the Festival. On both sides of the main stage simultaneously edited images were also screened throughout the festival. The Palau television station also broadcast images from the previous 2000 Festival that took place in Noumea. After the Festival a film was made, first in Palauan language and then in English to be screened elsewhere. Of course most delegations were also filming and taking photographs for their own pleasure while outsiders had to have a permit to do so.

The means of organisation of the 2004 Festival of Pacific Arts in Palau as described above, and all the various performances and workshops, reveal that circular explanations of the festival in terms of identity politics are inadequate. The Palau festival, as a total social phenomenon, provided a discourse that attempted to counterbalance *both* the fragmentary effects of modern nation-state politics in the Pacific by celebrating linkages, and relationships of exchange (the Pacific Way), and the globalizing effects of foreign capital investment and interests. The stakes are high for all the participants who will meet at the next festival planned for American Samoa<sup>11</sup>.

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11. For an analysis of previous festivals see Stevenson (1999) and the whole issue of *Pacific Arts* 25 and Yamamoto (2006).

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