POLITICS OF DANCING: CULTURAL AND SOCIAL NEGOTIATION AMONG THE ISLANDS OF ULITHI ATOLL AND YAP PROPER

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Abstract

   Micronesia's Ulithi Atoll, with four inhabited islands, is the westernmost atoll of the Outer Islands of Yap State in the Federated States of Micronesia. Ulithi islanders perform traditional dances on formal occasions in front of their fellow islanders and also inter-island audiences, especially on Culture Day, which they celebrate once a year. Ulithian dances are powerful methods of entertaining the audience, of demonstrating the people's resourcefulness, of memorizing the collective past, and of communicating messages to the audience. In front of a heterogeneous audience Ulithians usually perform dances of Yapese origin, while dances of Ulithian origin are reserved for audiences from their own island. Thus the performance of Ulithian dances functions as a form of negotiation for securing a position within the power structure of the islanders within the atoll and beyond.

Keywords: Culture Day, dance, Micronesia, Ulithi Atoll, Yap

Introduction

   Ulithi is the westernmost atoll (except for Ngulu) of the Outer Islands of Yap State in the Federated States of Micronesia. It is one of the largest atolls in the world, about 35 km long from north to south, and 18.5 km wide from east to west, and is located about 160 km to the east-northeast of Yap Proper. In the atoll there are four inhabited islands: Mogmog (population 191), Falalop (481), Asor (62) and Fassarai (113) (Yap State Government 1995). The language of Ulithi shows a close affinity with other languages of the Outer Islands, whereas the Yapese language spoken on Yap Proper is not intelligible to the Outer Islanders.

   Because of its geographical location, Ulithi has commanded the highest position in the social hierarchy of the Outer Island communities. During the regular tributary trade (known as *sawei*), that took place between the Outer Islands and Yap Proper until the early twentieth century, Ulithi was a point of transit where all the canoes from the Outer Islands assembled before they moved on in a group to Yap Proper (Lessa 1950). This resulted in considerable cultural influence on Ulithi from outside, including the introduction of dances from Yap Proper and other Outer Islands. Of all the Outer Islands, Ulithi maintains a particularly strong tie with its eastern neighbor, the island of Fais, located 60 km away. Although the sawei trade ceased many decades ago, Yap Proper still exerts informal authorities over the Outer Islands and imposes traditional restrictions on the Outer Islanders who stay on Yap Proper itself. Of these restrictions, the use of traditional attire and the prohibition of dance performances are most noticeable.

   In contrast with the large population of Yap Proper, which has over one hundred villages in which about 7,000 people live, Ulithi has a total population of 847, living in four islands, each

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of which has one village community. Among the four inhabited islands, Mogmog has tradition-
ally commanded the highest status and is regarded as the most ardent upholder of traditional val-
ues. However, because of the size of the island and the construction of an airstrip and a high
school, Falalop has now become the economic and administrative center of the atoll, although it
is the least traditional island.

Against this background, one of the interesting issues to have emerged in the interaction
among Ulithi islanders and between Ulithi and Yap is the politics of dancing, which is probably
the most sophisticated art form in Yap State. Referring to Pulapese dance in Chuuk, Flinn dem-
onstrates that dance is a powerful and effective means of communication with both intra and in-
ter-island audiences, signifying their identity and strength in contrast to other islanders (FLINN
1992). In this paper I will argue that Ulithians choose to perform dances with "a distinct audi-
ence focus" (FLINN 1992: 62) in order to achieve the desired result in communication through
dance.

Ulithian Dance

As a form of dancing, Ulithian dance is similar to Yapese dance (TUN 1996). Ulithian
dances are performed by a group of men or women who also chant an accompanying text. Three
types of dance can be distinguished: sitting dances, standing dances, and bamboo-stick dances.
Bamboo-stick dances, popular in Yap Proper and other parts of Micronesia, are not common in
Ulithi Atoll, and are especially rare on Fassari and Mogmog. If the dances are ever performed
they are done only by women. In general, a dance performance is organized by a village commu-
nity on a formal occasion and must be rehearsed and performed according to a set procedure.
Apart from dances performed strictly for tourists, dancing is a serious matter because it is always
critically evaluated by the audience (KONISHI 1999). In this sense, a dance performance is a dis-
play of the effort and resources the community is able to devote to achieving a goal.

Ulithian people perform dances originating from both Ulithi and Yap Proper. The text of a
dance of Ulithi origin, chanted in Ulithian, can be understood by Ulithians, but the meaning of
dances originating from Yap Proper is obscure to them. The dances practiced in Ulithi differ
from one island to another. In Yap there is a prevalent notion that a dance is owned by a village
community, and this may also apply to Ulithi. It is asserted that only Fassari and Mogmog still
practice traditional dances in Ulithi Atoll. The people of Fassari, for instance, know the follow-
ing dances.

1) Yipel	Men's standing dance	Yapese
2) Yolfath	Men's sitting dance	Yapese
3) Yorwal	Men's sitting dance	Yapese
4) Lorob	Men's standing dance	Ulithian (partly Yapese)
5) Saragela	Men's standing dance	Ulithian
6) Lugereg	Men's standing dance	Ulithian (no longer performed)
7) Langelpiy	Men's standing dance	Ulithian (known also on Fais)

Some dances of Ulithian origin recount an "historical event", either factual or imagined, of
the ancestors. For instance, Saragela is purported to be based on a true story. This story tells how
a mad man from Ulithi went to Yap Proper as a participant in the sawei trade. There he was
taught by the Yapese to use magic and then told to use this magic to annihilate the population

of Ulithi. When he returned to Ulithi, he proposed that the people should go to a tobacco plantation on the island of Fais. In the middle of the journey to Fais, the man called up a tornado that killed all the people on the boat. The father of two boys who were killed in the incident composed this dance to get over their death. On levels such as this a dance can be seen to be a collective memory in which the bodily movements of dancers serve as a means of remembering their own history (PETERSEN 1992).

Ulithians perform dances of Yap Proper origin as regularly as those of Ulithian origin. These dances must have been introduced to Ulithi by the atoll islanders and Yapese alike during the long history of social interaction between the two communities, including the sawei trade. What is remarkable is that these dances of Yapese origin are always performed on occasions when people from other islands are present, whereas the dances of Fassari are performed only by and for the people of the island of Fassari. This divergence is also seen on other islands and becomes most apparent on an inter-island occasion such as the Culture Day celebration.

Culture Day

The introduction of cultural policies to the Outer Islands started between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. In order to foster the traditional culture of the Outer Islands, a culture teacher was appointed for each island school and a cultural coordinator was assigned to coordinate the teachers' activities. The program was initially under the jurisdiction of the Yap State Department of Education but later became independent. Although the cultural program is planned to encompass the Outer Islands in their entirety, separate island communities usually organize each particular activity. In the case of Ulithi Atoll, the four islands of the atoll and the neighboring island of Fais seem to comprise a group of island communities that organizes cultural activities.

One of the main activities of the cultural program is to organize the annual Culture Day, an idea apparently borrowed from the Yap Day celebration on Yap Proper that has been held since 1968 to celebrate the cultural and natural heritage of the island (AOYAMA 2001). In Ulithi, since its inception in 1992, the Culture Day celebration has been held by the Outer Islands High School on Falalap, where representatives from the four islands perform dances and set up a booth to sell handicrafts made on the islands. The high school is a logical choice as the host of the activity because this is where children from all the islands of the atoll assemble and it has its own culture teacher. Apart from the people of Ulithi, the people of Fais have also customarily been invited to attend the Culture Day celebration in Ulithi. Although bad weather sometimes prevents them from making the voyage to Ulithi, this signifies the close tie that exists between the two communities.

In 2001, the Culture Day celebration was held on the 23rd and 24th of February. The dates were chosen to be on a Friday and Saturday to coincide with regular flights of Pacific Missionary Aviation connecting Yap Proper and Ulithi. In the celebration, the men's standing dance, women's bamboo stick dance, women's standing dance, children's bamboo stick dance, and women's hula were performed. The proceeds from the sale of handicrafts was donated to the school and the goods left on the shelf were exhibited and sold during the Yap Day celebration on Yap Proper held on the 1st of March. However, Ulithians do not perform dances on Yap Proper. Thus the two celebrations are linked but kept as separate activities.

Dance as Cultural Negotiation

Ulithians, as well as other Outer Islanders, are reluctant to perform a dance publicly on Yap Proper due to an age-old customary prohibition. However, some Ulithians also attribute this reluctance to perform to what they see as the mediocre quality of their performance in comparison with that of a Yapese performance. Given the fact that most Yapese have more resources to utilize in preparing a performance and strong anxiety about audience criticism is universally prevalent, this may well account for the Outer Islanders' reluctance to perform a dance on Yap Proper.

It must also be noted that Ulithians are hesitant to perform dances of Ulithian origin in the presence of people from other islands of the atoll. Only dances of Yapese origin are considered to be suitable to show to heterogeneous audiences on occasions such as Culture Day. This practice can be understood only when we realize that dances can "mean different things to the audiences corresponding to different levels of community" (PINSKER 1992: 47) and that dances need to be performed in a particular way so that they can send the right messages to the audience.

When dancers perform a dance on their own island in the presence of a homogeneous audience, either a dance of indigenous origin or of Yap Proper origin may be performed. An indigenous dance tends to enhance the social cohesion within the island community by narrating a collective memory of the community's past in an intelligible language. On the other hand, considering the cultural prominence of Yap Proper, the ownership of a Yapese dance may enforce their self-assurance by the mere fact that they own and can perform it.

On an occasion like Culture Day, where people from other islands of the atoll are present, a more complex picture emerges. The participation of the dancers at the occasion conveys a message of solidarity to the dancers from other islands and to the audience. However, the tradition of their own island has to be concealed from the people from other islands. Concealment of tradition is a tendency that Pinsker has pointed out to be prevalent in Micronesia. She asserts that "knowledge in Micronesia, however, is not always shared; power is gained through the withholding of knowledge. This has to be considered when examining the relations between multiple audiences and the multiple meanings of dance performances" (PINSKER 1992: 52). Therefore, if it is not possible for dancers to perform a dance from their own island, the only alternative is to perform a dance of Yap Proper origin. This also enforces the prestige of the dancers' island in the eyes of the heterogeneous audience.

For the people of Ulithi Atoll, dances are not only an entertainment or a means of artistic expression but also a means of demonstrating their resourcefulness, memorizing their collective past, and communicating messages to the audience. Therefore, the nature of the audience, whether intra-island and homogeneous or inter-island and heterogeneous, determines the signals to be sent and the choice of the dance to perform. Thus dance is a form of negotiation for an island community and a means of securing their position in the complex power structure among islanders within and beyond the atoll.

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