

# OGASAWARAN DANCERS' ENCOUNTERS WITH PACIFIC DANCES

## A Report from the 9<sup>th</sup> Pacific Festival of Arts in Palau

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### Introduction

The Ogasawara (Bonin) islands are located 1,000km south-southeast of Tokyo and include two main inhabited islands, Chichijima and Hahajima, with a combined population of 2,500. Since 1968 they have been administered as part of the Tokyo Metropolitan area. After the first settlement from Hawai'i in 1830, the settlers and their descendants, from various cultural backgrounds, including Japanese, have assimilated and live together. Between 1914 and the 1950s, Ogasawara and Micronesia were part of a common political entity under first Japanese and later US administration, and this facilitated exchanges of culture between the two areas. In this paper, I outline Ogasawaran dancers' encounters with Pacific dance, especially Micronesian marching dance, at the 9<sup>th</sup> Pacific Festival of Arts held in Palau in 2004, and discuss its impact as a case study to consider how a small islands' music researcher can encourage cultural development through collaboration with local people.

(NB: Information or quotations from interviews conducted by the author are indicated by the reference 'interview, a person's name, date/month/year'.)

### A brief history of dance exchange between Ogasawarans and Micronesians

Marching dances are generally performed by a line of male and/or female dancers who kick the respective leg forward and upward as the leader calls 'Left, right'. Although the origin of the dance is unknown, fragmentary information available in Palau, Yap, Chuuk and Pohnpei suggests that it may have been introduced into the western area of Micronesia from the eastern region (Pohnpei or the Marshall Islands) in the 1920s. In the

eastern region, the marching dance is called *leep* (Marshallese), *lehp* (Pohnpeian) or *lep* (Mwoakilloa) and all of the Mwoakillese and some of Pohnpeian songs for it have Marshallese lyrics.



Figure 1 Pohnpeian *lehp*  
Photo by Junko Konishi (6/8/2003)

A similar form of dance is called *maas* in the central and (part of) the western Caroline Islands and by Carolineans in Saipan. The western centre of its dissemination was Angaur island in Palau, where Micronesians forced to mine phosphorus held dance competitions or exchanges as entertainment <sup>[1]</sup>.

During the period of Japanese administration, when Japanese popular songs were introduced by Japanese private citizens and Micronesian children were educated in Japanese schools, marching dances performed to Japanese songs flourished in the western Caroline Islands and in Saipan. This seems to have been encouraged (directly and/or indirectly) by the Japanese government through their providing performance opportunities for it while restricting the staging of indigenous dance. Opportunities for cultural exchange between Micronesians also increased at this time. Songs with typical Japanese melodies and with lyrics written in Japanese became a tool for communication between Micronesians whose mother tongues were different from island to island.

By the 1930s, Ogasawara developed as a staging port between mainland Japan and Micronesia. Under the Japanese administration, some parts of Micronesia provided employment opportunities for Ogasawarans. One Ogasawaran who exploited this was Joseph Gonzales, who visited Saipan, learnt marching dance and its accompanying songs and taught them to Ogasawarans upon his return to Chichijima in the early 1930s<sup>[2]</sup>. The dance was performed to a series of songs with lyrics that used central Carolinean words. In addition to a song named *Yoakemae*, the lyrics of which were in 'incomplete', fragmentary Japanese, to make the dance easily identifiable to islanders, the Ogasawarans later developed the songs *Urame*, *Uwadoro*, *Gidai* and *Aftairan* (Danki, 1982:148-149) for dances that are collectively called *Nanyo odori* (South Pacific dance). In 1987

Ogasawarans established the *Nanyo odori hozonkai* (the association for preserving *Nanyo odori*) to maintain the dance, and the song materials were classified as an intangible cultural asset of Tokyo Metropolitan area. In 1999, *Nanyo odori* as a whole became classified as a performing arts form, reflecting the Micronesian-influenced history and culture of the region (Tokyo, 1999:95). Since then, the dance has been maintained with minor changes<sup>[3]</sup>.

Although Ogasawaran-Micronesian communication continued under the US administration after World War Two (prior to Ogasawara's restoration to Japan in 1968), the rapid Americanisation of both areas resulted in music and dance exchange between them being lost. Each Micronesian island developed a local form of marching dance, adopting foreign and contemporary elements of music and dance, while Ogasawarans continued to perform song materials in unknown words without knowing the origin and history of their transmission.

## Summary of the Festival of Pacific Arts

The Festival of Pacific Arts<sup>[4]</sup> has been organised by and directed to people of the Pacific for the purpose of recognising themselves "as members of a single identity" of "Pacific Islanders" by bringing together their divergent cultural inheritances (Betham, 1972: 5). The idea of the Pacific Festival of Arts was first proposed in 1965 by the South Pacific Commission (SPC)<sup>[5]</sup>, which was founded by Australia, France, New Zealand, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States of America in 1947 under the Canberra Agreement (SPC, 2000).

In 1972, the first Festival, named the 'South Pacific Festival of Arts', was realised in Suva, Fiji. This has been followed by Festivals held in different countries/regions every four years, that is, New Zealand (1976), Papua New Guinea (1980), Tahiti (1985; which replaced New Caledonia formerly scheduled for 1984), Australia (1988), the Cook Islands (1992), Western Samoa (1996), New Caledonia (2000) and Palau (2004).

Following the third Festival in Port Moresby, the southerly limitation specified in the event's name was dropped, reflecting the organisers' notion that in the context of the Festivals "South Pacific" has a cultural rather than a geographical meaning (Wari 1980:10) and participation was extended to Micronesia, whose islands lie north of the equator. As a result, the number of participating countries/regions increased from 18 at the first Festival to 27 at the eighth. However, lack of financial support and the geographical distance to the host countries has often prevented Micronesian dancers from participating.

At the ninth Festival, of the 30 countries/regions attending, 27 were Pacific countries/regions (whose delegations included more than three hundred Micronesian

dancers from Palau, Yap, Kosrae, the Federated States of Micronesia, Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, Marshall Islands and Kiribati; and 3 were special guest countries - Indonesia, Japan and Taiwan. Programs of the Festival showcased various aspects of Pacific culture, such as performing art shows, demonstrations and/or displays of wood/stone carving, navigation and canoe racing, tattooing, visual arts, literary arts, healing arts and culinary arts.



Figure 2 Audience at the Opening Ceremony of the Festival  
Photo by Junko Konishi (22/7/2004)

Invitations were extended to countries outside those usually considered as Pacific Island nations for the first time in the history of the Festival. As a special guest country, Japan was mainly expected to contribute financial support and it was not envisaged that any Japanese performers would participate. It was unsurprising that the Festival Committee, which mostly consisted of relatively young members, did not know about the dance connection between Micronesia and Ogasawara during the period of Japanese administration of the region. Even the Japanese government and most Japanese do not know the past culture and history of Ogasawara.

## Encounter

In the mid-1990s, the *Nanyo odori hozonkai* opened its membership to newcomers and temporary residents of the Ogasawara islands to compensate for the withdrawal of those older-aged inhabitants who had become involved in local culture prior to World War Two. Some of the new members seeking an identity as Ogasawarans were eager to search for the origin and meaning of the dance song materials. As a Micronesian music researcher, I offered information on the present status of marching dance in Palau, Yap, Chuuk and Pohnpei, which inspired some Ogasawarans to visit Micronesia to watch them. In 1991, Akiko Yonemitsu (1970-), a newcomer and the former secretary of *Nanyo odori hozonkai* (until 2001), visited Palau and Yap to make a video of their dance performances and screened this on her return. This personal access as a tourist did not however result in further communication between Ogasawarans and Micronesians about the dances.

As a researcher, I perceived that the 9<sup>th</sup> Pacific Festival of Arts, where Palauans and Micronesians would gather, would provide an excellent opportunity to present Ogasawaran *Nanyo odori* and marching dance to a wider Pacific community. Even if Ogasawarans could not perform in public, their observation of other performances at the Festival could stimulate them to develop their own dances. Soon after the 8<sup>th</sup> Festival held in New Caledonia in 2000, I called Tsuneyoshi Kodaka, a member of *Nanyo odori hozonkai*, to tell him about the 9<sup>th</sup> Festival and, when I visited him on February 21<sup>st</sup> 2003, nine dancers planned their participation<sup>[6]</sup>. On January 7<sup>th</sup> 2004, at the business meeting of the Study Group on the Music of Oceania at the 37<sup>th</sup> International Council for Traditional Music held in Fuzhou and Quanzhou, China, I became a Committee member of the informal gathering in Palau planned subsequent to the 9<sup>th</sup> Festival. In this role I proposed a dance exchange between Ogasawarans and Palauans, which would be of benefit not only to dancers from both areas but also to ethnomusicologists specialising in Pacific music and dance.

While I arranged for the Ogasawarans to perform for the scholars, one Ogasawaran dancer, Midori Yokoya, negotiated with Santos Olikong (Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Palau Embassy in Tokyo) for them to be officially invited to perform at the Festival. Olikong, who spent his high school days in Guam with Ogasawaran friends in the 1960s, was delighted to see pictures of Ogasawara which revealed that both the natural environment and the *Nanyo odori* practice were similar to those of Palau. He was also interested to learn of the past dance connection between Ogasawara and Micronesia. On June 24<sup>th</sup> he wrote a letter to the Committee proposing an Ogasawaran performance at the Festival that would allow them to appear on two stages for their “special” performances (interview, Yokoya Midori 11/9/2004).



Figure 3 *Nanyo odori* performance at the Festival  
Photo by Shinya Idani (28/7/2004)

During the Ogasawarans' preparations and practice sessions in Palau, a Palauan Festival volunteer, Ricky Spis, introduced himself to the performers. Spis had finished 3 years' *kogakko* (Japanese school for islanders) and 2 years' *hoshuka* (extra class) and had learnt

to sing Ogasawaran songs while sailing between the Micronesian islands in 1952-1966 (interview, Ricky Spis, 30/7/2004). He soon became close to the Ogasawarans and offered to perform with them as a guest singer. He also invited some Ogasawarans to his home to view a video copy of a Japanese documentary, *Umi no seimeisen: waga Nanyo gunto* ('Our marine life line, South Sea Islands [Micronesia]'). The film had been made in 1933, with the support of the Japanese Naval Ministry, as a propaganda item about Japan's southern territories, and was broadcast by NHK TV<sup>[7]</sup> after the discovery of an archive copy. Palauan audiences enthusiastically responded to the Ogasawarans' performance of the Nanyo odori, especially when dancers began the second part of the dance song, *Yoakemae*, whistling and humming along together. This was not only because the incomplete Japanese song texts were familiar to Micronesians prior to World War Two, but also since the song is still used for a part of Palauan marching dance. The Micronesian audience responded to the dance gestures of *Uwadoro* with laughter, interpreting their 'original' meaning, which Ogasawarans did not understand.



Figure 4 Palauan audience at the farewell party  
Photo by Junko Konishi (2/8/2004)

## Communications

The *Nanyo odori* performance became the talk of Palau during the Festival not only among audiences at the site but also those who watched them on cable TV broadcasts. When Midori Yokoya dropped in at a supermarket, a young clerk told her that she enjoyed watching the dance along with her mother, who was familiar with the dance songs and Japanese popular culture (interview, Yokoya Midori, 11/9/2004). A rumour that *Nanyo odori* may have been taken to Ogasawara by Palauan boat people spread among Palauans, who were interested in the dance which was so familiar to them (interview, Kempis Mad 1/8/2004).

On 1 August 2004, at a session of the ICTM Study Group on the Music of Oceania meeting entitled 'Special workshop for Palauan-Ogasawaran dance communication' Palauan dance leaders/instructors, ethnomusicologists and Ogasawaran dancers

enthusiastically discussed the differences and similarities in dance movements and song tunes between the Ogasawaran and Palauan versions. Palauan dance instructor Kathy Kesolei and a composer/musician Roland Tangelbad's comparative discussions and demonstrations were, in particular, observed with much interest (Flores, 2004: 37).



Figure 5 ICTM Study Group on the Music of Oceania meeting  
Photo by Junko Konishi (1/8/2004)

During the Festival, the visiting Palauan ambassador to Japan, Olikong, arranged a meeting between Ogasawaran dancers and locals attending the Senior Citizens Centre. Three of the eight dancers who remained in Palau after the festival shows performed dances for the old Palauans and the Palauans taught them the lost verse of *Parao no 5 chome*, a common Micronesian-Ogasawaran song, and sang a Japanese song, *Aogeba totoishi*, for them (which impressed the Ogasawarans). In this way, Ogasawaran-Palauan dance exchange, which I planned with Ogasawaran dancers, also provoked Palauan interest in Ogasawaran culture.

After the Ogasawarans' return to their home islands, I suggested that they hold a meeting for Ogasawaran villagers to report the events and to share what happened in Palau. The dancers readily accept this and arranged a meeting room, advertised it to villagers and prepared their presentations. Ogasawarans who participated at the meeting discussed the future development of their dance and culture. Thus, members of *Nanyo odori hozonkai* were encouraged to continue the dance exchange with Palauans<sup>[8]</sup>.

## Summary

The issue of the vexed relationship between the researcher and the informant is still under discussion in ethnomusicology. This case study profiles a cooperative relationship between a researcher and cultural bearers that proves that we can develop each subject through a relationship beyond our reciprocity. A researcher's professional information and support were helpful for the performers involved not only to realise the dance exchanges but also to avoid problems with Micronesian audiences who recalled their

experience of Japanese administration. Dancers were encouraged by the Festival audiences' responses then took back their experiences and spread the friendship further. This provided me with an invaluable research opportunity to record the processes. In addition, I learned aspects of the process of staging dance, by being an emcee for the performance, while dancers learned how to present their experiences in Palau. Also, I learned computer techniques from Toshio Watanabe, an Ogasawaran dancer, and learnt how to display goods at a meeting from Midori Yokoya and Momoyo Odamaki. Through sharing knowledge and skills, we broke the 'researcher/cultural bearer' distinction and built a real cooperative relationship. In other words, a 'fieldwork experience' with a researcher and dancers awoke us to what we could do together.

## Endnotes

[1] Palauans call marching dance *matamatong*. The term seems to have originated from the progressive form of the Pohnpeian word *mwadong* (*mwadomwadong*), meaning "to play; to take recreation" (Rehg and Sohl, 1979: 63) and dancing (interview, Nagaoka, 5/8/2004)

[2] Kitaguni refers to an interview with Sueka Kikuchi (1913-2001), the widow of Trahiko Kikuchi, in which she states that she remembered Joseph, his younger brother Christfer and his brother-in-law Torahiko Kikuchi teaching the dance to young villagers between 1923 and 1925 (Kitaguni, 2002: 135). It was possible that Joseph introduced the dance during his period back on the island; however, there is no further evidence to substantiate this. (Joseph died in 1935 one year after his return to Chichijima) (ibid: 134).

[3] In 1994, Kyoko Ohira (1922-) carefully produced a coherent version to show the Emperor on his visit to Ogasawara. The *Aftairan* dance was not subsequently performed however, due to problematic aspects, until it was revived in 2003 after locals watched a past video recording.

[4] After the word "South" was removed in 1985, the name of this Festival, as written in English, varies among festival organisers and writers, and includes "the Festival of Pacific Arts", "the Pacific Festival of Arts", "the Pacific Arts Festival". In this article, "the Pacific Festival of Arts" or simply "the Festival" is used.

[5] The name changed to Secretariat of Pacific Community in 1998, however, both of them are commonly called the SPC (Yamamoto 2001:3).

[6] Eight members finally participated in at the Festival.

[7] The film was broadcast in the early 1990s. Spis obtained a copy of the video sent by an elementary teacher from Mie Prefecture who visited Ailai village for a cultural exchange with his students in 2002.

[8] The *Nanyo odori hozonkai* applied to the Mitsui Sumitomo Insurance Foundation for a dance exchange program in 2005 and were successful in securing 500,000 yen in April, 2005.

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