

Espritu tasi/ The ocean within: Critical dance revitalization in the Pacific

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ABSTRACT

Work by Teaiwa (2008, 2012), Kaeppler (2004), Alexeyeff (2011), Mazer (2007), Royal (2008), Freeman-Moulin (2011) and Cruz-Banks (2009, 2010) highlights indigenous dance endeavours and predicaments from Aotearoa/New Zealand to Kiribati to Hawaii to Tahiti and the Cook Islands. Scholars examine the complex postcolonial, pan-indigenous, multicultural and diasporic contexts that provide windows into how people construct their identities and worldviews through dance. This paper takes a look at what is happening on Mariana Islands, located in the northwestern Pacific Ocean. Specifically, this study looks at the island of Guåhan/Guam and the 2011 Chamorro dance competition/Dinana Minagof and also engages in some of the broader questions and challenges relevant to the emerging Pacific Dance Studies field. Furthering the work of Flores (1996, 1999), this study is the first to examine specifically what dance revitalisation efforts reveal about contemporary Chamorro identities. In this preliminary dance ethnography, I explore the challenges of cultural revitalisation, share observations, comments, raise questions, and make some recommendations for (re)conceptualising Chamorro indigenous dance practices.

INTRODUCTION

Influential Pacific Island Studies scholar Epeli Hau'ofa (2008) argued the arts are central to invigorating homegrown cultural ideologies and practices and this is evident in indigenous dance research around the Pacific continent. Work by Teaiwa (2008, 2012), Kaeppler (2004), Alexeyeff (2011), Mazer (2007), Royal (2008), Freeman-Moulin (1994, 2011) and Cruz Banks (2009, 2010) highlights endeavours and predicaments from Aotearoa/New Zealand to Kiribati to Hawaii to Tahiti and the Cook Islands. Many of them point out that dance work in the Pacific has complex postcolonial, pan-indigenous, multicultural and diasporic contexts that provide windows into how indigenous people construct their identities and generate their worldviews through dance. This paper considers what is happening on the Mariana Islands, located in the northwestern Pacific Ocean. This particular study looks at the island of Guåhan/Guam and the 2011 Chamorro dance competition/Dinana Minagof, which means 'a happy gathering', and also engages in

some of the broader questions and challenges relevant to the emerging Pacific Dance Studies field.

The director and conductor of *Dinana Minagof* is Frank Rabon, a key Chamorro dance educator and choreographer on the island. Under his leadership, *Pa'a TaoTao Tano* (way of life of the people of the land), a non-profit organization formed in 2001, produced this event. This is the umbrella organisation for most Chamorro dance groups on *Guåhan/Guam*, other Mariana Islands and in California. Federal and local grants, corporate sponsors and local fundraising fund *Pa'a TaoTao Tano*. The aim of the organisation is “to promote the cultural traditions of the indigenous people of Guam and the Marianas and...to develop a forum in which our Chamorro cultural practitioners can perform, exhibit, and share the traditions of Chamorro people”.ⁱ *Pa'a TaoTao Tano* has over 600 practitioner-members—dancers singers, musicians, crafters and visual artists.

The emergence of this organisation and the social movement to enliven dance within the Marianas can be best understood within a historical context. Rabon has commented that Chamorro dance and music have been shaped by colonial encounters with the Spanish, Americans and Japanese; all of these different influences have impacted today's Chamorro culture.ⁱⁱ In 1521, *Guåhan/Guam* found the Ferdinand Magellan expedition at its shores. The island is layered with 400 years of colonial conquest: first Spain, then the United States when it became a US territory following the Spanish-American war in 1898. *Guåhan/Guam* was also occupied by Japan during World War Two. The island is an unincorporated territory of United States and US military bases occupy 39,000 acres or 29% of the land. In addition, *Guåhan/Guam* has ongoing multilateral migrations and its indigenous people are demographically an ethnic minority.

This social history and political context has fuelled the island's cultural renaissance. Several people have ‘spearheaded’ dance regeneration in *Guåhan/Guam* including Frank Rabon, oral historian Leonard Iriate of the group *I Fanlalai'an*, Dr. Judy Flores of *Gef Pa'go* cultural village and Dr. Benji Santiago, who founded the *Natibu Dance Company*. The revitalisation of dance and its related arts on the island was inspired by interactions with other Pacific nations at the Festival of Pacific Arts in 1976, when Iriate (and later others) recognised the need to recover pre-Spanish contact dance. People on the island often describe these ancient dances as dead, destroyed or lost. Hence, the above choreographers are engaging in what Flores (1996) calls the “reinvention” of Chamorro indigenous arts. Their sources of inspiration for re-establishing traditions derive from other

Pacific Island cultural styles, observed and learned, Spanish missionary accounts, early Mariana ethnographies, current research, oral histories and the natural environment.

Furthering the work of Flores (1996, 1999), this study is the first to examine specifically what dance revitalisation efforts reveal about contemporary Chamorro identities. In this preliminary study, I explore the implications of the 2011 Chamorro Dance Competition/Dinana Minagof and the challenges of cultural revitalisation of indigenous knowledge on the island of Guåhan/ Guam. I share observations, comments, raise questions and make some recommendations for (re)conceptualising Chamorro indigenous dance practices. To begin, I describe the atmosphere created by the Dinana Minagof and how it felt to be present for the weekend event.

The hair on my skin rose when the young songstress passionately sang “Mariana, Mariana”. She was a member of the dance troupe Guma Kanon I Tano, who performed at the 9th annual Chamorro Dance Competition/Dinana Minagof and Festival held 25-26 June 2011 at the University of Guam’s field house. Rabon introduced each of the fifteen gumas or dance groups from around the Marianas, along with the special guests from Japan who were featuring in the festival. Rabon had trained all the guma teachers. Participants included young children to respected elders in the community. The dancers and chanters wore beautiful landscape-inspired regalia, adorning themselves with leaves and fresh flowers. Over a hundred young people performed on the stage against a painted backdrop of a sunlit blue sky reflecting the ocean and horizon; the portable mural prominently featured huge latte stones, a massive banyan and many nigok (coconut trees) with wild flowers growing from lush green grass.

The opening ceremony included prayers and festival blessings from the *matua* (chief) and then the festival began. The bilingual Chamorro/English event was divided into three categories: Contemporary, Spanish and Ancient. The gumas were judged on best overall performance across the categories and individually. Each style of dance had their own suite of judges and before a guma would begin their performance, one to two student representatives of the group would come on stage to speak about the cultural dance work they were doing. Rabon chaired this question and answer section. Judges would ask the dancers in the Chamorro language: What is the significance of

Chamorro language on Chamorro culture? What is your favourite aspect of Chamorro culture to perform and why? What are we celebrating and why is it important? Some of the dancers would ask for the English translation but would respond in Chamorro.

Beautiful children came on stage with fierce confidence, strength, conviction, and commitment and there were some adorable disoriented, nervous ones too. The songs bounced across and permeated the big spacious auditorium as lead singers and musicians contributed from backstage. For the contemporary and Spanish dances the guitar featured prominently, while the ancient section was more percussive, featuring the stick rhythms and djembe drums originally from West Africa. Families and friends packed the field house and cheered for their children. Crafters set up stalls on the other side of the auditorium, directly across the stage, with spondalus, blue coral, bone, conch shells, mango jam, cartoon drawings, T-shirts with the printed phrase ‘lechay’,ⁱⁱⁱ red rice, wood-carvings and other items for sale.

This snapshot of the affair illustrates how dance on the island of Guåhan/Guam is a window into contemporary Chamorro identities, transcultural production and the dilemmas and opportunities of colonialism. In this event there is an active reaching back into the cultural timeline and a clear desire to know and honour the cultural distinction of the Mariana Islands. The two-day festival uses dance, chant and music as a way to ‘charge up’ Chamorro integrity and activate cultural rebirth and political transformation. It is an effort to practise traditional modes of education and storytelling, though not without contradictions and questionable cultural frameworks. Nonetheless, I witnessed some effective performances, moments when the chanting and dancing unleashed *kana* (spiritual energy) into the space—a tangible power that gave me goose bumps and sometimes made me cry when the energy created felt particularly profound.

BAILAN IRENSIA-TA/EMBODYING HERTIAGE

In the Guåhan/Guam context, dance is a tool for strengthening culture, less about the physical form but more about the consciousness it creates (Flores, 1999; Iriate, personal communication, November 6, 2010, July 2, 2011; Rabon, personal communication, November 10, 2010). If I can pose a possible working definition of dance relevant to Pacific people, I would say it is the embodiment of relationships. The link between bodies, oral histories and cultural production is key to

understanding the role and purpose of dance. Underwood (2012) noted that we all have histories finely woven into our identities, paraphrasing the late renowned African-American writer and political activist James Baldwin to illustrate his point that history does not refer to the past, we carry it within us. This idea has also been articulated by Chamorro spoken word artist and rapper dākota Alcantara-Camacho, who raps the verse: “I am like a turtle, I carry home on my back”; the stanza was inspired by the work of Chicana poet and feminist, Gloria Anzaldúa (personal communication with Alcantara-Camacho, June 17, 2012). Dance exemplifies how we carry home, because how people dance or not dance is often a reflection of cultural politics and the political choreography of identities. Our bodies are repositories of tragic histories, pain, joy and triumphs; and articulations of kinetic expression are often determined by the contours of the land and sea where we live and, hence, the rhythms of everyday life.

PACIFIC DANCE STUDIES AND NOTES ON METHODS

To explore how Dinana Minagof is a window into contemporary Chamorro identities, the methodology of dance ethnography is employed. This is a research approach that considers how culture is at once mirrored and produced through dance (Keappler, 2010; Novack, 1990; Sklar, 2001). Sklar (2001) writes: “one has to look beyond movement to get at its meaning” (p. 31). Foster (2009) would add that dance analysis must be critical of the ‘Sachs legacy’ that has led to measuring dance with ethnocentric comparison and categories. One of the assumptions Sachs (2001) makes is that non-Western dances do not evolve. However, in Pacific Dance Studies, we see how dance channels, subverts and (re)invents culture simultaneously. The following perspectives offer viewpoints on how dance creates worlds and how worlds create dance.

Māori dance advocate and scholar Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal (2012) points out that indigenous creativity and development is about the needs and opportunities articulated by a community and about the evolution of indigeneity appropriate for the world today. Royal’s activism and research with Orōtokare illustrates the innovation of Māori haka or dance. The Orōtokare project aims to rebalance the masculine with feminine attributes and avoid the over-preoccupation of tribal-based identity assertions in haka (Māori dance; Royal, 2009). Orōtokare employs instead the natural world such as fish, birds, water, which constitute a collective Māori cosmology, to inspire new dance.

Teaiwa (2012) examines the diaspora of Banabans from their island homeland to Fiji and how land loss as a result of mining led to the creation of a new intra-Pacific dance. She found their choreographies helped to reconcile the cultural dominance of Kiribati in Banaba, and in addition, helped them to emotionally process displacement and politically affirm their unique identities. Her study indicates that people use dance as a platform to express their political voice. The dance symbolises the fluid continuum between ancestral land, body, ongoing histories, cultural hybridity and passing on dance culture to the next generations in Fiji. This story situates how diaspora can bring about the emergence of new traditions that give voice to postcolonial experiences and birth new forms of movement knowledge.

Freeman-Moulin (2011) offers another perspective on voice. She discusses the integral relationship between body and voice, or what she calls the sonic dimension of dance in French Polynesia. Dancers make sound visible, she explains, through vocal styles and body percussion. The dancer can invigorate co-dancers and audiences with the sound she or he produces. She discusses how sound is visualised through dance and how sonic power can often prompt joyful and celebratory emotions. The research guides our thinking to consider the seamless link between body, sound and voice. It indicates that the convergences of kinetic and acoustic expressions are culturally meaningful and productive.

The Pacific dance researchers discussed above refute static notions of dance but more importantly show how traditions negotiate culture. Royal (2009, 2012), Teaiwa (2012) and Freeman-Moulin (2011) illustrate dance work by engaging in critical, creative and political discourses and practices. At the heart of this work we see identity construction and culture revitalisation being carried out. In these examples, dance disseminates corporeal epistemologies that invigorate indigenous worldviews in diverse ways.

These perspectives are relevant to the Guåhan/Guam context because they provide examples from the Pan-Pacific dance world that aid conceptualisations and endeavours toward dance revitalisation in the Marianas. Dissecting unidentified colonial lenses, creating and locating inspiration for indigenous creativity, embracing how culture is hybrid and influenced by diaspora, is vital and ongoing work to be done. Furthermore, in-depth articulation of epistemic-philosophical-somatic heritages is a rich springboard for the proliferation of Chamorro dance.

Revitalisation of dance has been used to correct the historical oppression of culture by colonialism and Christianity around the globe (Cruz-Banks, 2009). Across

the Pacific, dance provides access to cultural roots for determining the routes of reconciliation and healing from cultural degradation (Hau'ofa, 2000, 2008; Hereniko, 2006; Teaiwa, 2005, 2008). Renowned Kenyan writer wa Thiong'o (1986) wrote that "decolonizing the mind" was about promoting cultural expressions such as songs, music and dance. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) states that decolonising methodologies involves research processes and principles that are aligned with indigenous cultural values. These goals asserted by wa Thiong'o (1986) and Smith (1999) are easier said than done. Hence, in this research I pay attention to the difficulties of recovering indigenous knowledge. In addition, I explore how best to assess (post)colonial challenges in order to advance Chamorro cultural knowledge and cosmologies.

As a Chamorro and African American woman born in the United States who has been living in Aotearoa/New Zealand for over five years, I reflect on this topic as a daughter of the Mariana-Guåhan/Guam diaspora and also as a dancer-ethnographer. While this research offers a preliminary analysis, I draw from three visits to the island and my perspective of studying dance in very diverse geographical-cultural contexts. Since 2009, information has been collected through field notes based on the participant-observation of Pa'a TaoTao Tano and I Fanlalai'an's dance rehearsals and performances, and through attending Dinana Minagof in 2011 and the planning meetings and dance festivities leading up to the 2012 Pacific Festival of Arts, held in the Solomon Islands. In addition, I have also had informal conversations with key dance educators for Pa'a TaoTao Tano such as Frank Rabon and Brain Terlaje, and I also have been engaging in ongoing discussions with Leonard Iriate of I Fanlalai'an since 2009. However, I acknowledge a need to conduct more conversations with these key individuals and extend this to local dancers and the wider community. I also need to spend more time on Guåhan/Guam and the other islands to get better acquainted with the nuances of the cultural dance climate. Another limitation is that I do not speak Chamorro, hence I miss a lot of cultural meaning. However, this research increases my knowledge of the language and Chamorro heritage. Ultimately, the inspiration for this project is to learn about my family genealogy through researching dance on the island.

FRAMING THE DANCE DEBATE ON GUÅHAN/ GUAM

Pacific dance research explicitly calls for more attention to the ecological picture of dance because this is easy to miss. Our definitions and histories of dance are

tangled in colonialism, Christian conversion, diaspora stories and imprinted with the effects of global capitalism and American pop culture. An important context for understanding indigenous dance practice is that frequently it seeks to nourish and/or (re)develop somatic relationships with land, sea and ancestors. For many communities, dance is what Daniels (2005) calls “social medicine”—a healing practice that reclaims ritual and identity, creates community and family harmony and that responds to postcolonial predicaments. For example, discussing dance in the Native American context, Henderson (2000) calls this process “postcolonial ghost dancing” or in other words, consciousness-making and recovering native epistemologies. In short, it is about asserting indigenous worldviews.

There is a lively debate regarding issues of romanticisation, authenticity and appropriation of Chamorro dance. For instance, Underwood (2012) accused the dance troupes of idealising ancient Guåhan/Guam and called this history unrecoverable. He argues there is a glorification of the ancient Chamorro if one makes a mistake to leapfrog over their parents or the heroes right in front them in effort to try to recover ancient caricatures. I agree that bypassing the present is a problem but I would argue Underwood’s assessment of dance on the island is too harsh and narrow. Members of dance groups express the importance of connecting with their ancestors and this is achievable. For example, mythological characters such as Puntan and Fu’una, who are the founding son and daughter of the Chamorro genesis story, have stimulated Chamorro dance troupes. These paragons have inspired Chamorro memories and heritage connections that help weave past into present. For instance, in interviewing dancer Maxine Quinga Bigler, she said her participation in Pa’a TaoTao Tano helps her to understand who she is and gives her a sense of pride in her people. Another dancer, Dan Mendiola, stated that it gives him an understanding of his culture and that he believes this needs to be promoted throughout the island because he does not want it to die out. Mendiola concludes, “I do not want it lost to future generations.”^{iv} In Guåhan/Guam, Flores (1999) emphasises that invigorating ancestral relationships is a key goal for dance communities. Valuing of ancestry, Royal (2009a) explains, is about investing in cultural knowledge that resides in both the temporal and transcendent worlds. In other words, it is what we cannot see and also what is in front of us. Inspired by Marsden (2003), Royal (2009a) says: “We live in a woven universe”; there are elements that must be accounted for that live in the visible and invisible world.

The Underwood (2012) analysis raises several questions for me. What is the relevance of dance for the contemporary Mariana Islands? How does Dinana Minagof

implicitly and explicitly articulate Chamorro culture, history, and Chamorro identity?

No one would argue that Dinana Minagof did not have multiple educational benefits. Pa'a TaoTao Tano provides opportunities for people to dialogue about critical cultural Chamorro issues in the native language. Participants learn a repertoire of chants and choreography that is cultural relevant to their genealogies and contemporary lives. The dances they learn are often reflective of a pan-Pacific borrowing and beyond, and this has triggered disputes about cultural appropriation that are controversial in some community circles on the island. For example, Iriate (personal communication, November 6, 2010, July 2, 2011) argues that often Chamorro dance is based on Hawaiian dance styles and uses non-traditional instruments. He suggests there is a need for protocols for promoting cultural accuracy. Iriate (personal communication, November 6, 2010, July 2, 2011) calls for more discussions about the ethics of representation of Chamorro heritage. I agree with Iriate on the principle that more research is needed and inspirations for what is called Chamorro dance should not be taken lightly. I would add that decolonising Chamorro notions of 'contemporary' is necessary to do this work and I elaborate on this in the next section. For other Pacific examples and discussion of the dilemmas of cultural borrowing, see research done by Keappler (2004) in Hawaii, Freeman-Moulin (1994) in the Marquesas and Tahiti, Teaiwa (2005, 2008) in Kiribati and Fiji, Alexyeff (2011) in the Cook Islands and Mazer (2007) in Aotearoa.

DECOLONISING NOTIONS OF CONTEMPORARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Dinana Minagof showcase began with the contemporary section reflecting on "how we see Guåhan/Guam today", in the words of Frank Rabon. His introduction was followed by one of the dance schools performing what looks like the Carolinian stick dance and singing the famous Lionel Richie and Michael Jackson composition 'We are the World' in Chamorro. Another group performed a take on Walt Disney's *Lion King*. Gorgeous children were dressed like flamingos, lions and trees and sang Elton John's 'Circle of life' in Chamorro and English. These selections represented modern Guåhan/Guam, said Rabon. In these presentations I can see the unabashed influence of popular American culture. As Hattori (2006) notes, modernisation too frequently equals the Americanisation of Chamorro culture (see also Perez, 2005). This signalled to me the need to rearticulate contemporary Chamorro dance and what contemporary creativity means for the Mariana island context. What are the

conditions of innovation? How do Chamorro indigenous epistemologies inform Chamorro creativity? What are the somatic perceptions of Chamorro dance? What are the principles and protocols around performance and cultural borrowing? How does the environment inform our dance traditions: the qualities of the sea, the air, the ground below, the flowers, and the animals? In the Māori context, Royal (2009b) states that performing arts should enable nature to find expression through human creativity. How does the land and sea of Marianas find expression in Chamorro dance? Rabon (2001, 2007) does address the development of pre-contact and post-contact movement for his school but I think the philosophies of reinvention of Chamorro dance need to be continually readdressed.

In many Pacific cultures, the term traditional dance is often used to describe contemporary or 19th century dance practices and there is a fine line between tradition and contemporary. In Guåhan/Guam, the authenticity debate needs to be part of this conversation. Discourses about what is real, accurate Chamorro dance would benefit from problematising these dichotomies. The question of how dance is conceptualised at Dinana Minagof signals the need for more in-depth exploration of the island's hybrid heritage and lineage. The compartmentalisation of dance at the festival into the categories of contemporary, Spanish and ancient seems to reflect a fractured sense of identity. If Underwood's (2012) reminder that we carry our histories with us is assumed, then chances are these genealogies are not separated neatly into silos, but instead these moments of time represent the continuum of heritage. Reflections about how people carry these storylines simultaneously need to be discussed. What are the implications of this compartmentalised framework or way of viewing history? Taking stock of the fluidity between past and present, cultural hybridity and diaspora effects are important to strengthening the Guåhan/Guam dance renaissance.

The questions raised in this research are important for taking back knowledge authority. Hokowhitu (2010) calls this the genealogy of indigenous resistance. He argues that colonised people need to stop defining ourselves through colonial lenses and start taking responsibility for identity making and making careful choices about how we represent and conceptualise ourselves.

In the collection of oral histories in the book *Mariana Island Legends* compiled by Bo Flood (2001), there are some very rich stories of dance shared by Felipe Rauk via his son Joseph. Joseph recounts his father's stories and how dance promoted cultural and emotional survival during World War Two. In war-torn times, dancing was healing. Rauk remembered dance taught him to light the fire within

and pay respect to his ancestors and be proud of his heritage (Flood, 2001). He was told to lift his heart, hold truth in his body and lift his spirit with dance. Leonard Iriate (personal communication, July 2, 2011) has also stated that chanting should fine-tune one's sensibilities and develop an acute observation and communion with the environment. He went on to say dance is never central to ceremony; it is about creating connection between people and cultivating unity with our island and ancestors. These are great starting points for a discussion on the creative philosophies of Chamorro performing arts.

As Hau'ofa (2000) notes, our cultural expressions are how we keep our knowledge alive. Dance is a source of kinetic storytelling, memories and genealogies, and is essential to how we make our worlds. I see dance as important to bonding ourselves to the ocean within, quieting down and transforming cultural dominance. To conclude, the dance renaissance in Guåhan/Guam is an opportunity to claim an indigenous voice and energise culture. The festival itself and the other significant dance communities within Guåhan/ Guam illustrate that heritage moves, grows, and activates the wisdom that sprouts from the unique vantage point of the Marianas. As Aguon (2010) states, the people of Guåhan/Guam, especially the next generations, need to become keen listeners to our own ocean of knowledge.

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ⁱ Excerpt from festival programme.

ⁱⁱ Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riezj6Zkuso>

ⁱⁱⁱ A Chamorro euphemism that has many meanings depending on context but translates into 'dam' or 'calm down'.

^{iv} Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riezj6Zkuso>