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Music and alcohol on Palau and Tobi

On Tobi Island, out of a canoehouse near the beach, its interior lit by the flame of a hurricane lantern, a rough chorus erupted into the night: *Okei, okei! / Hanei tafei!* 'OK, OK! / Give him medicine!' Men sang it and burst into laughter. Emerging into the moonlight, a figure staggered down a path toward his house. Those he had left behind roared the song after him.

At the same time about 650 kilometers north, on Koror Island, young men were likely sitting on a bamboo bench, looking toward the sea from a hillside perch above their village. From a coconut, they were drinking a mixture of coconut water and vodka. They passed the coconut around, and each man took a sip. As the evening wore on, they added more and more vodka, making the beverage stronger and stronger. Occasionally, the coconut paused in its circuit, as the man holding it became engrossed in conversation, argument, or song. Then the man next in the circle would sing out (after a text and translation by Tony Ngiralbong):

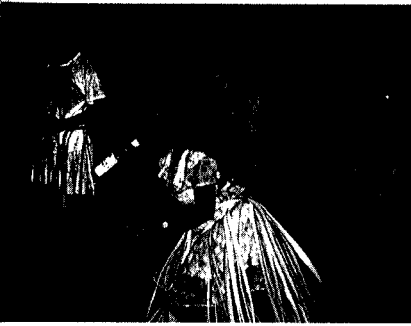


FIGURE 5 Celebrating New Year's Eve, women of Tobi dance. The bottle contains only water; the supply of imported liquor ran out weeks ago. Deploying the bottle in this fashion expresses an important social fact: music and alcohol often go together in Palau. Photo by Peter Black, 1972.

Sechelik, momdasue e morchedii a kob.
Lilekong melemei leng uoi meketketang ir tilechang.
Engak a kurusii.

My friend, think and hurry up the cup that went your way.
Pass it back, because it's been too long with you.
I am longing [for the drink].

As soon as he finished singing, his "friend" would pass him the coconut.

These incidents reveal the role of alcohol-related singing in expressing social insights and processes ordinarily left unsaid—a common cultural feature of drinking songs in these societies (figure 5). They also reveal a paradoxical difference between Palauan and Tobian social worlds. If we name the competitive dimension of social life stressed in Palauan life Palauan, and the cooperative-solidarity dimension prominent in ordinary Tobian life Tobian, the Palauan song seems Tobian, and the Tobian song Palauan. Each social system has as a cultural counterpoint the main theme of the other, and that counterpoint is what these drinking songs express.

The larger context

The Palau Islands are a tightly grouped archipelago, home to about fifteen thousand people. Once an administrative district of the U.S. Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, these islands became the Republic of Palau, whose capital is the town of Koror. Included within the nation (as in the old district) are the remote Southwest Islands: Sonsorol, Pulo Ana, Merir, Tobi. The three hundred people who call them home have more in common with one another and the peoples of small coral islands to the east, in Yap and Chuuk, than with the people of Palau proper, who form a single cultural and linguistic unit.

The social systems of Palau and Tobi differ sharply. Palauan life stresses hierarchy and bilateral competition at multiple levels. Southwest-Island life stresses egalitarian and cooperative relations between people affiliated in roughly equivalent units. The contrast is between vertically and horizontally structured social systems. These are not autonomous: since the early 1900s, the Southwest Islands have been part of a Koror-centered political system. Both peoples occupy a single social field; nevertheless, important differences between them remain. These differences, which appear in many situations and contexts, help explain contrasts in the ways men in drinking parties use music.

Drinking on Tobi

Tobi (Hatohobei) is a low, coral island, where traditionally men fished and women gardened, and on special occasions men engaged in communal drinking, consuming all available alcohol. Since most of what they drank was toddy (*hajii mwen*), locally gathered and fermented, drinking parties required planning. Once men had produced enough toddy, they began drinking, and they did not stop until the island was again "dry"—whether this took days, or even a week.

A typical Tobian drinking party occurred in the canoehouse and involved most of the men on the island. It was organized loosely into a central group of committed participants and a peripheral group, who for a few hours joined in, but then went home to sleep, or even to try to carry on some piece of their ordinary activities. Meanwhile, the island's women and children tried to lurk about without being noticed—to listen to the talk and jokes, to react if physical violence occurred, and

especially to hear "bad" songs, which, after becoming inebriated, one or more of the men would likely bellow out.

Few Tobians considered local songs fit for mixed company. Most of those that were suitable were sung while persons of one sex danced for those of the other. Their lyrics tended to express the dancers' pride in their sex-specific attributes and activities. Nor did music from other places fall under this restriction: as people went about the ordinary life of the village, they publicly and unself-consciously sang Japanese, American, and Palauan songs. In contrast, many songs that men sang in their canoes as they fished, or women sang in their gardens as they worked and gossiped—songs with scatological and sexual meanings, buried beneath layers of metaphor—were unfit for situations in which people of the opposite sex might hear them.

Rules of avoidance and respect governed relations between men and women, especially sisters and brothers. One of the most important rules prohibited people from engaging in talk or song with a sexual or scatological content in the presence of a person of the opposite sex. Thus, local songs were seldom heard legitimately within the confines of the village, except when people danced for one another. These rules only heightened the interest that people of one sex had in the music of people of the other.

Men's songs moved into the women's world more rapidly than women's songs moved into the men's. Women's songs entered the men's world only when men (mostly teenaged boys) sneaked into taro fields to listen to women as they gardened. Men's songs moved into the women's world every time men mounted a drinking party because women (and children) gathered to overhear what they could. Therefore, when a man staggered out of the canoehouse, his wife and sisters were likely hidden somewhere within earshot—and they, too, might have laughed to themselves as the men inside repeated the phrase "*Okei, Okei! / Hanei tafei!*"

This phrase was a taunt. It poked fun at a man who, unable to keep up with the others, was withdrawing. Intensely egalitarian and cooperative, the Tobian social system permitted only indirect expression of male competition, but the competition was no less real for that. Letting alcohol release customary checks on the competitive aspects of Tobian male identity, drinking parties were exciting events because disallowed aspects of social relations, especially confrontation (verbal or, on rare occasions, physical), might occur. Men who left these parties before the toddy was gone appeared to be running away from that possibility. And those left behind used the song to point this out, in a direct and insulting fashion, unavailable in other contexts. The "medicine" the song cites was not just a remedy for alcohol-related illness: it was also a cure for unmanliness.

Drinking on Palau

The Palauan song points in the opposite direction. Ordinary social life in Palau was characterized by structured, overt competition between most classes of persons, and as they went about their ordinary activities, young men were no exception. However, for drinking, they occasionally formed fellowships that momentarily suspended the lines of cleavage and competition in Palauan society.

In Palau, drinking was organized in a much more complex fashion than on Tobi. A cash economy and regular shipping made store-bought alcohol, rather than home-brewed spirits, the main intoxicant. Instead of one setting for drinking, Palau offered several: crowded bars filled with jukebox music, six-pack-fueled cruises in cars and pickups with amplifiers blaring, large house-parties, political gatherings. In many of them, men and women drank together, contrasting with Tobi, where women seldom drank, and then only in semi-secret parties of two or three.

Young Palauan men sometimes drank apart from community life. The lines of social cleavage which, in daily routine and politics, set these men and their families against one another, were ignored for the occasion, so the young men could drink in peace. Thus, the important word in that musical fragment from Palau calling the neglectful participant back to his obligation to the group is *sechelik* '[my] friend'.

In everyday life, Palauan men address one another in terms that call attention to differences in rank, differences the term *sechelik* denies. Like the Tobi song, the Palauan one gives explicit expression to ordinarily unspoken social truth, for, much as Tobian social activity includes a good deal of unacknowledged competition, so Palauan life contains a strong component of unexpressed comradeship.

—PETER W. BLACK