

## ***Taibobo*: Dancing over the Oceans, from Rotuma to Torres Strait and Back Again**

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### ABSTRACT

*‘Taibobo’ is the name the Torres Strait Islanders give to the style of singing and dancing that they learned from the Rotuman sailors who worked in the marine industry in the late 19th century. The Islanders of Eastern Torres Strait continued to practise them long after the Rotumans had gone, as a part of a repertoire of songs and dances, old and new. Beckett recorded Taibobo in the 1950s. When a Rotuman researcher came to Torres Strait in 2004, Islanders could still sing the songs which, as it eventuated, only the oldest people in Rotuma could remember.*

*The paper will place the Torres Strait adoption of the songs and dances in historical context and describe Taibobo – both the songs and the dances – as one of us encountered it in the 1950s, and later in 2004. Finally the response of contemporary Rotumans on hearing Taibobo recordings from the Torres Strait is documented, as well as the Islander responses to the re-establishment of contact after so many years.*

Keywords: Torres Strait Islander dance, Rotuman dance, pearling industry labour recruitment.

### INTRODUCTION

Born and Hesmondhalgh have remarked that ‘In contrast with ethnomusicology’s former object of study – “traditional musics” – it is diasporic music that has moved to the center of attention’ (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000:26). However, throughout the island Pacific, music and also dance have long been among the things transmitted between communities, whether as gifts, bought or even stolen. European colonisation did not so much change the fact of transmission as the circumstances under which it occurred. Thus, while previously most transmissions seem to have occurred between neighbouring peoples, they might now occur over much greater distances, the most well-known instance being through the activities of Christian missions, but also the movement of labour. However, while the global idea of modernity may suggest continuous expansion, in particular localities, it may be interrupted, rather a matter of ebb and flow, as in the case to be described here.

The locus of one such set of transmissions has been the Torres Strait Islands, situated between the tip of Australia’s Cape York and what is now the Western Province of Papua New Guinea. In the 1860s and 1870s they were almost simultaneously overtaken by the London Missionary Society and the beche-de-mer (trepang) and pearling industries, bringing people from all over the Pacific, who came into relations with the local population (Beckett 1987; Haddon 1935; Mullins 1995; Shnukal 1992). In one such encounter, Rotuman seamen taught the Meriam-speaking people of Eastern Torres Strait a style of singing and dancing that they came to know as *Taibobo*.

The recruitment of Pacific Islander seamen ceased with Federation and the introduction of the White Australia policy at the turn of the 19th century, and while some Rotuman men who had married Islander women were permitted to stay, all had died by the 1930s. However,

their legacy remained. Jeremy Beckett recorded Taibobo songs and learned some of the dances, in the course of anthropological field work in the late 1950s. Forty-four years later, in 2004, a Rotuman researcher, Makereta Mua, came to Torres Strait, seeking to make contact with Torres Strait Islanders whose fathers or grandfathers had been Rotuman. She was surprised to discover that Taibobo songs and dances were remembered, although now rarely performed. Back in Rotuma, she played the recordings to some of the old people. They did not know the name Taibobo but recognised the way of singing as that of earlier generations.

There is now a rich anthropology of music and dance in the Pacific, describing the interaction between local and global influences. Here, however, we are concerned with what one might see as an ethnographic oddity in which the connection between donors and recipients of Taibobo was interrupted for such a long period, and then suddenly re-established. We will ask what happened to their respective music and dance in the interim, and then what happened when connection was re-established.

Back in the early years of contact with the outside world, the Meriam-speaking people of Eastern Torres Strait<sup>1</sup> took up new styles of singing and dancing from strangers, without however, abandoning the old ones. Many of their traditional songs were said to have come from somewhere else, as supernatural beings arrived to institute various cults, which usually included songs and dances. In the colonial era, it was human beings who brought songs and sometimes also dances, not just the Taibobo with which this article is concerned, but missionary hymns and much beside.<sup>2</sup> Taibobo has long since ceased to be a favourite style, but when it emerged that it was no longer practised back in Rotuma, the Eastern Islanders accorded it a respected place in their history of music and dance.

This article will first present the documentary and oral history accounts of the original transmission of Taibobo from the Rotumans to the Meriam-speaking people of Eastern Torres Strait, Jeremy Beckett will then describe the Taibobo he encountered in the 1950s, situating it in the overall Meriam repertoire of singing and dancing of that period. Makereta Mua will then describe the Taibobo that she encountered in Torres Strait, and what happened when she brought it back to Rotuma, reporting the response of the senior generation and comparing it with contemporary singing and dancing on Rotuma. Finally the writers will reflect on the significance of Taibobo in the new millennium, when music and dance have become cultural capital, defining identity.

#### ETHNO-HISTORY

The Torres Strait Islanders do not seem to have had regular contact with Europeans until Britain's establishment of its Australian colonies, when the Strait became a route to the Indies. The situation changed radically in the 1860s, first with the commercial exploitation of beche-de-mer, and pearl shell, and then in 1871, the arrival of the London Missionary Society, which over the next decade established 'teachers' from the Loyalty Islands throughout the Strait (Beckett 1987:25, 39, 44–5; Haddon 1935:15–7; Mullins 1964:118–38). These were later succeeded by pastors from the Cook Islands and Samoa. Within the decade, the Queensland government had formally annexed the islands, establishing an administrative base on Thursday Island, which also became the centre for the marine industry (Mullins 1995:118–9).

In its early years, the marine industry brought in workers from all around the island Pacific, among them what is now Vanuatu and the Loyalty Islands, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Niue, and Rotuma – collectively known to Torres Strait people as 'South Sea' (Shnukal 1992). They were mostly single men, and being either based on the islands or spending time ashore, they eventually established friendly relations, many marrying Islander women.

The mainly British or Anglo-Australian white pearl-ers, missionaries, and government officials regarded the South Sea men as ‘lesser breeds’, but their contacts with the Torres Strait natives were usually transient and socially distanced, whereas the ‘South Sea men’ were in regular contact (Mullins 1995). Many of them came from islands that had embraced Christianity some time earlier than the Torres Strait people, and some had travelled the world, so that they found the latter unsophisticated, and regarded themselves as superior. Nevertheless, the lives they had come from were in some respect similar to that of the Torres Strait people: they grew the same kinds of crops and engaged in formal exchanges. Singing and dancing were also integral parts of their cultures (Beckett 1987; Shnukal 1994).

The LMS (London Missionary Society) teachers and pastors attempted to impose Christian discipline on their new converts, although with varied success. Often disapproving of dancing of all kinds, they were particularly suspicious of the traditional dances but were more inclined to tolerate South Sea dance (Haddon 1912:290). The Anglican Church that replaced the LMS in 1914 was less restrictive, but by this time the Eastern Islanders had adopted South Sea dances, without, however, forgetting the old dances.

W.H.R. Rivers (one of the scientists in the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Strait) noted that in 1898 many Meriam women were marrying South Sea men, ‘the largest number being from Rotumah (*sic*)’. He added that such marriages ‘are very popular among the parents of daughters on account of the present received from their sons-in-law’ (Haddon 1908:18). Recently, Boa Mabo, a senior Meriam, recalled being told by Marou, who had been a teenager at the time of the Expedition, that the Meriam were *given* Taibobo in the course of a wedding at which several Rotumans married Meriam women in the villages of Mas and Gigrid (pers. comm.).

Exactly when this occurred is uncertain, but in 1892, the artist Tom Roberts, visiting Erub (also Meriam speaking), gave an account of the people of that community performing dances from ‘Rotumah and Lufu’ (*sic*, presumably Lifu), ‘which have been introduced and eagerly learned here’.

In these . . . the performers themselves singing what is a kind of round of only three or four notes, the words having mostly open vowel sounds, and while it is seemingly impossible to catch the modulations of the native chants, these others are comparatively easy to follow, and, as the men wheel round, and you catch from the deep voices the different notes and syllables, the effect is a very rich and massive one. Sometimes they stand eight deep, almost erect, the arms being raised, and the hands clapped, thrice on one side, then on the other, as the body is swayed over. Again, the first two of a line of men lead round from the rear, having fans of palms, the steps not being so much on the heel as with the extended foot, the toes touching the ground first. Now a movement will finish with all crouching in mass silent on the ground; there is a call as of one calling one to another; all rise – another step begins, all singing. (Croll 1935:218)

Although we are not familiar with the dances of Lifu, which the Islanders did not remember in later years, the dances described here sound very much like the Taibobo singing and dancing that Beckett observed on Mer 65 years on.

After Federation, White Australia became the rule, resulting in Pacific Islanders being repatriated, excepting those married to Torres Strait women (Mullins 1995:158–9). By the 1930s, however, almost all the remaining Pacific Islanders had died, though as we shall see, not without leaving a cultural legacy in dance and music, as well as the Creole, which is spoken throughout the Strait (Shnukal 2004).

## TAIBOBO, 1959

In 1958–9, Jeremy Beckett visited Mer in the course of an anthropological field study. It seemed that music and dance were integral to community celebration of both religious and secular festivals, as well as ways of just passing the time. Virtually ignored by the outside world, there was a great diversity of styles, which the Meriam kept distinct, classifying them for themselves in terms of historical and geographical provenance. Beckett, with an amateur interest in ethnomusicology, was soon exploring what proved to be a repertoire both rich and various.

Beyond the reach of radio, and without gramophones, the Meriam, like other Islanders, in the Strait at that time were free to create their own songs and dances, with new compositions coming every year. In church the hymns were often in the polyphonic style taught by Samoan missionaries in the early years of the century, but now with Meriam words. Following withdrawal of the LMS in 1914, the Church of England had succeeded, introducing their own *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, but allowing the hymns of the previous period (Lawrence 2004:46–72), and again with space for new compositions.

Outside the church, there were various occasions for music and dance; there were melodies sung in harmony, accompanied sometimes by guitars for a version of European dancing (called ‘Slow Drag’ or ‘waltz’), also for women’s dances, called *hula*. A sitting down dance was said to have come from Samoa. Papuan drums accompanied the occasionally performed traditional dances, with the distinctive feather headdress called *dari*. Drums also accompanied the more frequently performed ‘Island Dance’ in Meriam called *segur kab*, meaning ‘play dance’. This was said to be, and was, distinctive to the Strait as a whole (*cf.* Lahn 2004). Beckett was told that this mode of dancing had been derived from Rotuma, but while the dancers stood in ranks and moved in unison, the trunk was bent forward, rather than upright as in Taibobo as he later discovered. Moreover, the music was melodic and sung in harmony. It was only just before leaving at the end of his first stint, at a wedding on Thursday Island, that he heard an old Erub man (George Sailor) strike a chant and perform movements that were unmistakably different from what he had heard and seen before. This he was told was Taibobo. Returning in 1960 with a – for the period – good portable tape recorder, he asked the senior men to take him through the whole repertoire of their music, from before the missionaries, and what they had acquired from the South Sea men, including Taibobo.<sup>3</sup> This seemed to trigger a revival of Taibobo at a wedding, which Beckett was told was often the occasion for this kind of dance. Men and women in their 30s and older knew how to perform the dances, whereas those in their 20s had to learn, and the anthropologist learned along with them. Knowing his enjoyment of it, his friends performed it for his send off.

When friends taught Beckett how to sing the chants, they made it clear that the mode of singing Taibobo was quite unlike the ways Meriam sang other kinds of song. In place of the short melodies, sung in harmony, it took the form of what Roberts called ‘a round’, or in technical terms a canon. More a chant than a melody, two parts overlapped one another, thus:

*tue mata moi a we kara le langa e*

*a we kara tua namo o le langa (repeat)*

The first part would ‘strike’ the chant, the second would follow, the words being repeated over and over. Singers were precise about the mode of singing and the pronunciation of the words, as these had been handed down. The ‘problem’ with this kind of musical structure is that it does not provide a way of ending. Instead the leader would either clap his hands four times, following this with an ‘*ooh-ah*’. Alternatively, he would call out ‘*all eave-o osodi isera a*’.

Beckett recorded 12 of the chants (Beckett 1981), and a senior man, perhaps the most knowledgeable in the community, Marou, wrote out the words of another 40. With the exception of one song, no one knew what the words meant.<sup>4</sup>

Time was kept by beating a Papuan drum, although Beckett was told that the Rotumans had used a rolled up mat. He was also told that the Rotumans had worn pants, rather than the lavalavas worn by the Meriam dancers, and painted their bodies blue, a practice no longer followed, although shredded banana leaves were still worn round neck and arms.

The dancers stood in ranks, each making the same movements as the others. The posture of the male dancers was said to be like sitting on a chair that was not there, torso erect with knees apart. In the style that the Meriam called *tag-tag*,<sup>5</sup> the performer danced on the spot, moving the body so the weight shifted. The arms went through a series of movements reminiscent of winding, hauling, and turning, as of the wheel of a boat, punctuated by hand claps and the clapping of one hand over the flexed arm pressed against the chest to produce a sound like a gun shot. At intervals the dancers paused to allow the ranks behind to pass through to the front.

In what the Meriam called *tugifo*, the beat was faster and the dancers were in perpetual motion, with the back row working its way to the front in a line along the side of the dancers to take their place at the front.

#### WHY TAIBOBO?

In other parts of Torres Strait, Beckett found that the oldest generation remembered Taibobo, but later generations did not. Why then did the Eastern Islanders maintain it? There seem to have been more Rotuman-Islander unions in the eastern islands than elsewhere, but by Beckett's time, it seems to have become a community resource, alternative to, though less often performed than, *segur kab*. According to Boa Mabo, who learned Taibobo with Beckett, it had almost dropped out of the repertoire by time Makareta Mua arrived (pers. comm.). Indeed one might speculate that, had not Beckett accidentally sparked a revival, it might have been forgotten earlier. A song composed in the 1990s by Aven Noah, born after the 1959 revival, celebrated Taibobo as part of the life of the 'old people', including the characteristic ending, 'ol 'eave o. However, it does not seem that it was ever actually rejected.

#### A ROTUMAN RETURNS TO TORRES STRAIT

Makereta Mua's interest in visiting the Torres Strait began when the idea was first introduced by an uncle of Mua's who, during his university days in Melbourne in the 1960s, met a group of nurses from the Torres Strait who claimed that they had Rotuman ancestry (Isimeli, 2003, pers. comm.). Mua's own family had been a part of the early migration to the Torres Strait.

That some form of Taibobo was not completely forgotten became evident, when during her visit to the Torres Strait Islands in May and June 2004, Mua met several Part-Rotuman-Islanders who knew how to sing and perform Taibobo. May Passi, and her dance group called *Hoas ne Hoi* performed Taibobo during Mua's Welcome Ceremony organized by the Part-Rotuman-Islanders in May 2004 at Thursday Island. Here are the lyrics of the Taibobo:

1st chant

*Tausue lelei faitalamai fau lue se oi* (repeat six times)

2nd chant

*Rausi pipipiria rausi pipipiri* (repeat twice)

*Rausi tari taria rausi tari taria* (repeat twice)

Makereta Mua noticed that May's actions were similar to the Rotuman way of dancing and the lyrics were recognisable. '*Lelei*' in Rotuman means 'okay or good'; '*rau*' can mean 'leaf' or 'to count'; '*tari*' or '*taria*' means 'to wait'; '*pirpir*' means 'curly'. May told Makereta Mua that her mother, Rotannah Passi, had encouraged her to continue performing Taibobo and to teach her children and other young girls as a way of upholding their Rotuman identity.

Pastor Alo Tapim, a Meriam not of Rotuman descent, performed several Taibobo dances for Makereta Mua to a recording of Taibobo chants recorded by Jeremy Beckett (1960). A striking feature of one of the dances was his introductory movements – he stood with his feet apart and moved alternately from side to side, resting on each leg in turn while bending and straightening his knees while lifting his hands from his sides, clasping them together in front of his waist before releasing them to his sides again.

These positions and movements are similar to those of the *sua*, which is the first sub-category of traditional Rotuman dancing known as the *tautoga*. This action, known as the *tu siu* is interpreted by Vilsoni Hereniko, an accomplished playwright, film-maker and scholar and a professor of Pacific Islands Studies at the University of Hawai'i, as 'a mark of respect and a dedication of the dance to the chiefs' (Hereniko et al. 1991:127).

Azzie Noah, a Meriam, indicated to Makereta Mua that he would start teaching Taibobo to the younger generation in order to preserve it. He added that in the Murray Islands, certain people were chosen to be the main vocalists, bass, and tenors, but almost all of them have since died. Noah said that there were some Murray Islanders who still carry on the rhythm, movements, words, and tunes today. Noah added that Taibobo was usually performed during Ascension Day after Easter, and it was sung by both men and women before and during the feasting (Noah, 2004, pers.comm.).

Boa Mabo, another Meriam, who Makereta Mua later met on Mer also sang some Taibobo chants. He explained that traditional Meriam Islander dancing was similar to Taibobo and the early Rotuman migrants found it easy to teach Taibobo because of the similarity of body movements (Mabo 2004, pers. comm.).

Boa Mabo and Azzie Noah said that although Meriam did not understand the meaning of the lyrics, Taibobo was a chant that was given them by the original Rotuman migrants (Mabo 2004, pers. comm.; Noah 2004, pers. comm.).

When she returned from the Torres Strait Makereta Mua played Taibobo and showed video clips to a number of Rotumans in Fiji. They were able to offer a variety of interpretations based on identifiable links and fragmented parts from the distant past. References were made to the similarities between Taibobo and Rotuman musical forms.

Konrote Isimeli, a Rotuman elder and retired high school principal, found Taibobo 'innovative' and a means of traveling back in time to his childhood in Rotuma. His impressions, noted below, portray his feelings about the value and pleasure he derived from his experiences in childhood with his elders:

'When I first heard Taibobo music from the Torres Strait Islands I was utterly taken by its rhythm, power and, above all, by its deep familiarity. It seemed as if some latent part of me was being awakened. I responded to the lilting chants with guttural sounds of my own. It was my music. I was born in it, grew up with it as a young boy in Rotuma, and here it was being replayed by Islanders from a completely new part of the world.

It was such a curious and yet mystifying experience. I have always felt throughout my life that the true music of Rotuma is in its traditional chants. The *sua* in the *tautoga* as practised and demonstrated nowadays is only a mild indication of what our forefathers developed as traditional chants, composed out of the forceful emotions and power of expressive war music.

As a young ten-year-old boy growing up in Malha'a I had heard of similar chants to Taibobo chants. As young children in Pepehaua, we would often gather at the 'marae' to play traditional games in the evenings after dinner. The time would be about half-past seven. And

later, at about nine o'clock in the evening, the old men would gather under the moonlit shade of the breadfruit tree. There would be Taraua (a man from Juju married to a Malha'a woman), Jimione of Pepjei connections, Muamea'ta of Fayavai, Isimeli, Mos, Hanfiro originally from Hapmafau and often other old men from Else'e and Elasio in Malha'a.

These men, who were born in the late 1800s, would sit around a small 'tanoa' and probably reminisce their young adventurous days around the turn of the twentieth century. In comparison to current parties on the Island these evening gatherings appeared to facilitate the expression of an identity that belonged more to the nineteenth century rather than the 1950s. The kava they were drinking was merely a facilitating agent and never was the main purpose of these gatherings.

To me, on reflection of those evening observational experiences, the main aim was to relive their youth and chant the old music. For this was what a small boy in those evenings would hear – a gentle almost inaudible clap of the hands, a throttle sound deep from within, and alternating chants audible only within twenty metres of the group in the quiet moonlit shade of the breadfruit tree at about eleven o'clock in the evening (Isimeli 2004, pers.comm.).'

Rotuman informants indicated that Taibobo chants and dances had similarities to several Rotuman chants and dances. The Rotuman dance *tautoga* is divided into three categories [*sua*, *tiap hi*, *tiap furau*]. *Temo*, *Hual ta* and *Ki* are the other Rotuman chants. *Temo* are old Rotuman chants which were sung by men while they were sitting. Men sang slowly and softly with occasional light clapping. The late Elisapeti Inia, a retired school teacher and esteemed elder of the Rotuman community, wrote that *temo* were often sung by a group of elderly men when the body of a chief was lying in state and *temo* chants included stories of voyages, wars and heroic deeds (Inia 2001:60). *Hual ta* is a wrestling chant and the *Ki* is a war chant. *Temo*, *hual ta* and *ki* are no longer performed although the *tautoga* is still danced by Rotumans in Fiji and abroad.

According to Mosese Kaurasi, Taibobo is similar to the wrestling chants and war chants that were practised during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and these are no longer popular and are not even known by the present generation. He added that it may be due to the fact that certain sports were too competitive and the losers would have to pay their wagers which were traditionally pigs. Such a gamble would be too expensive in this day and age (Kaurasi in Fatiaki et al, 1977:150–151).

As Beckett has noted, Taibobo chants are sung in two parts – the first is similar to what is commonly referred to in Rotuman as '*sua*' which means 'to sing' and the second is called '*tari*' which means 'to support'. While this type of singing is now rare, Rotumans, like Taibobo singers, still use folded mats which are beaten by sticks to provide rhythm and music for the chanters and dancers. The body movements of Taibobo dancers are similar to those who perform the traditional Rotuman *tautoga*, which includes the *sua*, *tiap hi* and a third category of the recent past called *tiap furau*. The hand actions of some Taibobo dances are like the *tu siu* in the *sua*, where dancers lift their hands from the sides, clasping them together at the front of one's waist and then releasing them to the sides again. Another common thread that links Taibobo chants and dances and *tautoga* is the singing of 'iiiiiii' to signal to the performers that they are approaching the end of the chant (Kaurasi 2004, pers.comm.).

Regarding the movement of ranks in dancing, Beckett (1981) observed that a 'crocodile' of Taibobo dancers come from the back around the side of the other dancers to the front. Mosese Kaurasi said that Rotumans similarly danced in ranks and the dancers moved from the side of other dancers to the front (Kaurasi, 2004 pers.comm.).

Elisapeti Inia showed a lot of interest in Taibobo chants and transliterated them in order to examine their Rotuman roots. She analysed fourteen tracks on the Taibobo recording by Jeremy Beckett, with the English versions included. Inia identified some words and phrases out of many that are derived from Rotuman, Fijian and other Pacific languages.

Track 12 is a Taibobo chant titled Tugifo by the Murray Islanders. Elisapeti Inia and Maria Teresia Fiu, a Rotuman elder, confirmed that tugifo was indeed an old tiap hi, a traditional Rotuman chant and dance that is part of the tautoga:

Track 12

Mān ta is se Mān ta o (4) A bird called, a bird answered

Tei rau mai, tei rau mai (2) Where are the dried tobacco leaves?

Tui se rau lo Ready to be rolled.

Hi! oa

Tugifo is sung and danced to by Murray Islanders and this is their version of the chant:

1st part: Mamda ise Mamda ise  
 2nd part: Mamda ho Mamda ho  
 (clap) (clap)  
 1st part: Perongoi perongoi tute ]  
 Ongoi perongoi aulo ] repeated  
 (Beckett, 1981:10).

The Rotuman version of Tugifo (track 12) clearly demonstrated that Mamda ise mamda ho was in fact Mān ta is se Mān ta o. Several Rotumans mentioned that the old Rotuman chants contained verses that were half sung and that sometimes the meanings were hidden and even unintelligible (Fatiaki 2004, pers.comm.; Inia, 2004, pers.comm.). For example, Mān ta was the shortened version of Mān mān ta which meant ‘bird’ in Rotuman. Akanisi Vaurasi supported this argument and stated that the Rotuman chant rijaujau was sung in such a way that the words were shortened and had hidden meanings, typical of the old Rotuman chants (Vaurasi 2004, pers.comm.).

Mua’s Rotuman informants did not recognize the word ‘Taibobo’. This certainly appeared to be a mystery to them. They also did not recognize the ‘all eave-o osodi isera a’ that was sung at the end of the tugifo.

#### TAIBOBO IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

Towards the end of the 2000s, indigenous culture in Australia, as elsewhere, was acquiring new value, recognised by the government and legal systems, constituting significant evidence in court cases, including the famous Mabo case, which established that Islanders and also Aborigines were the prior owners of the land. At the same time, Islanders, like Aborigines, began asserting control over their cultural heritage, although who was entitled to claim authority over what was not always clear.

When Makereta Mua arrived in Torres Strait in 2004, she was, as mentioned earlier, greeted by a dance group, formed by a family of part-Rotuman descent. The leader, May Passi’s mother, had encouraged her to continue performing Taibobo and to teach her children and other young girls as a way of upholding their Rotuman identity. This however evoked criticism in the local newspaper, *The Torres News*, and on the local radio. Some Meriam Islanders complained that Taibobo had been given to their ancestors by the Rotumans and should not be performed publicly without permission of the elders. Some critics asserted that since it was male Rotumans who had introduced Taibobo to the Islanders, it was a men’s

dance, and so should not be danced by women. However, Jeremy Beckett remembered that both men and women danced it in the 1950s, and this was confirmed by Boa Mabo (2004, pers. comm.).

Intellectual property rights regarding the ownership of songs and dances and the right to perform them are crucial considerations for Torres Strait artists (Quiggin 2002:1)<sup>6</sup>. Makereta Mua remarked that if ever there is a question of copyright, these problems will have to be untangled.

It remains to be seen whether this outside interest in Taibobo will trigger a revival of interest in the whole Eastern Island community, even inducing the older men to start teaching Taibobo to the younger generation, as one of Makereta Mua's informants suggested. Several Rotumans in Fiji have expressed interest in performing Taibobo, and Mua is working with a group of Rotumans in Suva who wish to perform Taibobo during Rotuma Day, which is an annual celebration on 13 May to commemorate the Island's cession to the United Kingdom in 1881. Alternatively, it may remain the heritage of a few part-Rotuman families. However, despite exposure to global music through radio and TV even on the remote islands, Island dance and music, even including archaic forms now revived, have their place in festive and ceremonial life.

The most striking Rotuman legacy is the style of singing and dancing known throughout Torres Strait as Taibobo. This has been preserved mainly by the people of Eastern Torres Strait, on Erub and Mer. Their love of music and dance has helped the Meriam preserve Taibobo as a distinctive way of dancing and also of singing. Its performance has become a musical experience for them and the loss of meaning of the lyrics is not important because the importance is the identity that is produced. This article has demonstrated that indigenous culture in the form of Taibobo was acquiring new value for the Meriam as they tried to assert control over their cultural heritage by criticising May Passi and her dance group for performing Taibobo publically without seeking permission of the Meriam elders.

Track 12 of Taibobo was a traditional Rotuman chant that is no longer sung by Rotumans, and the remaking of this song by the Meriam demonstrates the evolution of Rotuman songs that have been transformed into an icon of Meriam culture. The migration of songs from Rotuma to Torres Strait and adoption of the song by the Meriam also creates an opportunity for Rotumans to revive a part of their cultural heritage that was lost to them. This article highlights the cultural dynamics across a wide area of the Pacific where the adoption of Taibobo illustrates the capacity to change and to preserve and the complexities of the interaction between the tendencies.

#### POSTSCRIPT

Following the re-release of Beckett's 1959 recordings, school students on Thursday Island are learning Taibobo.

#### GLOSSARY

##### ROTUMAN

*ki* War chant

*gagaj* Chief

*ho'aga* Extended kin groups

*hual ta* Wrestling chant

*mamasa* A feast given to a person after a sea voyage

*marä'e* Village square

*pipi* Inedible fruit whose kernel is used for scenting oil

*rijaujau* An old lively dance and chorus for both sexes; contains verses that are half sung, with hidden meanings; usually performed by people of Oinafa District

*sau* King

*sua* To sing (a song); perform a dance; first sub-category of *tautoga* (traditional Rotuman dance)

*tautoga* Traditional Rotuman dance. Tautoga is a suite of pieces in three types: *sua*, *tiap hi*, *tiap forau*

*temo* Temo are old Rotuman chants that were sung by men while they were sitting, slowly and softly, with occasional light clapping and with a chorus of quicker time with clapping and a castanet-like finger snapping. Men would sit together and chant temo during the funeral gathering of a *sau* (king). Temo chants included stories of voyages, wars, and heroic deeds.

## NOTES

1. Mer (Murray Island), Erub (Darnley), and Ugar (Stephen).
2. See particularly Nakata and Neuenfeld 'From Nakaho to Tabu Naba' in Magowan and Neuenfeld (Nakata and Neuenfeld 2005).
3. These recordings, together with others collected in other parts of the Strait, were published in two vinyl LPs, later reissued as cassettes. The Taibobo recordings were issued in Beckett 1981.
4. Gardiner reported that many of the chants he heard in Rotuma had come from other islands, and their meanings were not necessarily known.
5. In the Meriam language *tag* means hand, suggesting that this was their name for the dance with its frequent hand claps.
6. Kapua Gutchen, a Meuram tribal elder and educator had to acquire special permission from the Saisarem families, especially on Erub, to create his new song, *Zorom, Zorom, Baziarda* (Costigan and Neuenfeldt 2011:6–7). Gutchen's new work was inspired by the background to a local legend where the evening star [Venus, *iluell/ilwel*], a Saisarem girl, was the girlfriend of the moon, a Meuram boy, who was from Kapua's own tribe. The Saisarem tribe was the custodians of the sacred *iluell/ilwel* stone on Erub (Costigan and Neuenfeldt 2011:7).

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#### PERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS

- Azzie Noah, Suva, December 2004.
- Boa Mabo, Murray Island, June 2004.
- Elisapeti Inia, Rotuma and Suva, July 2004.
- Konrote Isimeli, Suva, August 2013 and June 2004.
- May Passi, Thursday Island, May 2004.
- Mosese Kaurasi, Suva, June 2004.
- Rev. Iven Fatiaki, Suva, August 2004.