

The AnthroGlobe Journal

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Anthropology*

The Changing Role of Music in a Polynesian Outlier Community: Anuta, Solomon Islands

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First posted: 22 March 2006



Anuta is a Polynesian outlier in the eastern Solomon Islands. Owing to the island's small size, geographical isolation, and absence of commercially exploitable resources, Anutan culture, including its patterns of music and dance, has undergone remarkably little change since European contact.

Anutan musical genres are largely the same as those reported by Firth for Tikopia, the neighboring island, three quarters of a century ago (see particularly Firth 1991), although with distinctive local twists.^[1] According to several consultants, some of the more esoteric genres have dropped out of common usage. But even now, Anutans use no Western instruments. The few radios they own are used primarily to monitor public service messages and shipping reports. They show little interest in Western musical styles, rarely listening to such broadcasts on the radio and never, to my knowledge, purchasing recordings. Nor did they show any interest in the guitar I brought to Anuta during my first visit in 1972-73.^[2]

CONTEXTS OF PERFORMANCE

Contexts for Anutan musical performance are essentially the same as in times past. The most notable are funerals and dances. Dance songs include literally dozens of varieties, the most common known as *mataavaka*, *mori*, *rau*, and *taki* (see Firth 1991; Feinberg and Love n.d.).^[3] These may be performed at feasts accompanying life crisis rites and (now) Christian holidays, and they often are performed by young, unmarried people on the beach at night. In addition, people often sing, either individually or in small groups, to pass the time while paddling canoes, walking through the garden area, or sitting idly at home. Songs are frequently composed in the context of rivalry: between men and women, between villages, or between the congregations of the two churches situated at opposite ends of the island's dwelling area.^[4] The rivalry is usually friendly, although it sometimes can be colored with a hint of social tension.

Puatanga 'dirges' or 'laments' typically are wailed at funerals. Each *puatanga* is

composed by a particular person for someone who has died or whose death is anticipated--often well in advance the victim's actual demise. Once a *puatanga* enters the island's repertoire, it becomes what might be termed part of the public domain and is used for funerals of others in an appropriate kin relationship to the singer. Musically, *puatanga* are similar to a variety of dance song called *te taki*; however, they are performed much more slowly, punctuated by sobs and cries of *Ee auee* 'Oh alas'! Usually, Anutans say that laments are wailed (*e tangi*) in contrast with dance songs, which are 'sung' (*pete*).

In addition to funerals for deceased relatives, laments are sung at ceremonies marking the loss of a canoe that has been damaged beyond repair (see Feinberg 1981, 1998). They are formally practiced by groups of kin in preparation for a funeral performance. At times, Anutans also may sing *puatanga* to themselves for amusement.

The greatest intrusion of Western music is in hymns and Christmas carols, which have been incorporated into the Anutan repertoire since Christianity's establishment early in this century. These are only sung in the context of church events and, to the Western ear, display a marvelously discordant quality, suggesting the limited degree to which such musical forms are understood and appreciated.

EMIGRATION AND CHANGE

Since the 1960s, a significant proportion of Anuta's population has resided in the central Solomons. Most emigrants are men, accompanied by a variety of kin, who have moved to the Russell Islands or Guadalcanal to work for wages. Geographical differences between Anuta and the Central Solomons, plus the differences in daily routine imposed by wage work and a corresponding scarcity of productive garden land and fishing grounds, has affected music and dance in the resettled communities to some degree. Still, changes in Anutans' aesthetic and musical sense have been remarkably slight.

Even in Honiara, the Solomons' capital, Anutans evince little interest in Western and Western-derived musical styles. They shun Western instruments, recordings, concerts, and radio performances, preferring to make their own music, relying on their voices and whatever objects come to hand for percussion. The church is less a central feature of Anutan life in town than on the home island. Food is less varied, and much has to be purchased. For all these reasons, feasts and dances occur less frequently in the resettled community. When dances occur, however, the musical performances involve the same repertoire as on Anuta. Modifications reflect the changed material surroundings, but not the impact of Western music.

While the music itself has changed relatively little, the context of performance has undergone a noticeable transformation. Owing to potential traffic hazards and the danger of violent crime in an urban environment, children are not left unaccompanied to dance on the beach at night; and dances performances often take on more the aspect of parties celebrating pay day than traditional feasts.

On Guadalcanal, most Anutans occupy a small cluster of houses in White River, a

neighborhood where many island groups are represented. There is less outdoor space than is available at home, and what space exists tends to be rocky and cluttered. Consequently, dancing is more likely to take place indoors. This is especially true when dances occur at night, when alcohol consumption is involved, or when it is raining. On Anuta, dances are usually suspended should a hard rain begin to fall. In town, it is difficult to reschedule events, and more suitable indoor dancing space is available. Still, a dance involving several dozen people inside a small dwelling structure places a strain on available floor space. Thus, although song selection is affected only slightly by the setting, the dances tend to be performed in a sitting position and involve primarily arm motions.

When foods are prepared for parties, taro, which is difficult to grow and expensive to purchase, plays little role. *Cyrtosperma* taro (*puraka*) is likewise absent from most feasts in Honiara. Banana is a rare treat. Sweet potato is readily purchased in the Honiara market, and is likely to be consumed. And manioc, a staple on Anuta, has become by far the dominant feast food in town. Rich puddings, which at home are likely to be made from taro, breadfruit, or banana, in town are almost always made from manioc. A popular Anutan food on the home island is *ma*, produced from starchy vegetables that are fermented in underground pits, often for years. In town, there is no space for *ma* pits, and time for preparation usually is limited. A substitute for true *ma* has been devised, in which manioc is cut into chunks and thrown into a metal drum that has been filled with water. It is permitted to decompose for a few days, fished out, cooked, and mixed with coconut cream. Although lacking the sharp tang of true *ma*, this preparation, termed *ma pakapara* 'decayed *ma*', exhibits a similarly pungent flavor.

Perhaps the greatest difference between dances on Anuta and in the Honiara area is the role of alcohol. On Anuta, alcohol is rarely available. Commercial beer, wine, and hard liquor are expensive; cash is always in short supply; and shipping still is limited to intervals of several months. In contrast with some other island communities, Anutans regard coconut palms as too valuable to damage for the purpose of collecting and fermenting toddy. Thus, betel typically suffices as the intoxicant of choice.

In town, alcohol and cash are far more readily available. Consequently, beer, wine, or hard liquor are regarded as indispensable for a dance party. Anutans say that alcohol makes them happy (*vakivaki*) and reduces their inhibitions, thereby improving their performance and increasing enjoyment for all present.

As is true elsewhere in the Pacific, drinking patterns differ dramatically from those of middle class Americans, Europeans, or New Zealanders. The so-called social drink is unknown, as is the glass of wine with a meal. Rather, most drinking is done in party or dance settings, which are planned days--if not weeks--in advance. Anyone with a few dollars of discretionary cash contributes to the purchase of beer, cheap wine, dry gin, or rum, all of which is stored until the day (or, more commonly, the evening) of the celebration. The festivities often begin with an alcohol-free meal, followed by song and dance. Drinking begins with the music, and the party continues until all the alcoholic beverage is consumed--usually around dawn. Most of the next day is devoted to sleeping off hangovers, and little or no further drinking is likely to occur until the next party. Children do not drink, and men indulge substantially more than women.

However, alcohol consumption in the overseas Anutan community is not gender specific.

Perhaps the most notable development among Anutans since the time of my first fieldwork in the early 1970s has been division of the community into political factions. On Anuta, the issue crystalized around the sale of food, maintenance of chiefly authority, and the organization of the church (see Feinberg 1986). In the overseas community, a complex but generally parallel set of disputes has arisen, largely over development strategies. One faction has emphasized obtaining grants and making deals with foreign businesses and governments; the other, led by the chief's brother, has approached such matters cautiously while striving to maintain a traditional focus on interpersonal cooperation and collective responsibility (Feinberg 1996). Relations between the factions have been characterized by mutual suspicion, rumor mongering, accusations of ethical and legal misconduct, and in a few instances, criminal prosecution.

In this context, music and dance provide a rare opportunity for people on opposite sides of the factional divide to get together on a friendly basis. Community members, regardless of political affiliation, enjoy the same kinds of music and dance performance. They continue to value the positive social energy that goes into a feast and party, and most community members contribute to preparations for the festivities. Members of opposing factions may still get together prior to the main event to select and rehearse the songs and dances that will be performed. At the party, all present participate in the singing and dancing, with evident enthusiasm. They encourage each other, offer each other beer, and contribute to making the collective event emotionally compelling for all.

Significantly, the friendly atmosphere is not undermined by alcohol consumption. In contrast with many communities, ethanol-induced loss of inhibition seems to apply only to the musical performance. Serious arguments and fights never seem to arise; and in the more than twenty years that I have worked with Anutans, I have never witnessed an act of physical violence involving competent adults.^[5] Anutans are big, strong people who are willing to confront danger if it is unavoidable. Thus, a number of Anutans over the years have taken positions on the national police force. Their inclination, however, is to resolve differences without physical confrontation. Often Anutans refuse to attend parties hosted by Tikopians or other islanders out of concern that drinking will lead to fights in which they prefer not to become involved.

SUMMARY

Anutan music has experienced relatively little change over a period of many generations. With the exception of church hymns and Christmas carols, dominant genres have remained more or less intact despite a century of Western contact. The contexts for performance of dance songs are changing, particularly for islanders residing in the central Solomons. However, barring a sharp increase in the number of Anutans to attend school overseas or otherwise come into close personal contact with islanders from elsewhere in the Solomons, the Westernization of Anutan musical styles is likely to remain a long, slow process.

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NOTES

[1] Many genres are identical and are designated by the same terms on the two islands. In some songs, Anutans intentionally substitute Tikopian words for their local equivalents, and many Tikopian songs have been borrowed verbatim into the Anutan corpus. In other cases, however, Anutans have retained their own language. A few genres are named differently or not recognized at all in the neighboring community.

[2] One young Anutan living on Guadalcanal at the time had a guitar, but it was missing several strings, and I never heard him play it. In 1983, on my second visit to Anuta, a teenaged boy owned and occasionally played a 'ukulele. This youth, however,

was an immigrant from Tuvalu who had been adopted by an Anutan family.

[3] Varieties less commonly performed include the *pua taa*, *tungaunu*, *pakapaapine*, *pakatamaaroa*, *tea*, *pete roo*, *tumarekau*, *pakapungarei*, *tu voko*, *taa nopo*, *mako rangi*, *neepuru*, *pakarara*, *mako rati*, *au keu*, *taritaripua*, *oa*, *uru*, *tipa*, and a number of others.

[4] There are two systems of village naming, and the dwelling area is divided into either two or three villages, depending on the system being used. Virtually all Anutans are members of the Anglican church, which was established on their island in 1916. In the older church, located in the southwestern portion of the island, services are conducted in English; in the newer one, located in the eastern portion of the island, services are held in Mota, the old lingua franca of the Melanesian Mission. For further discussion of village names in relation to a system of symbolic dualism, see Feinberg (1980, 1981, 1988).

[5] The only adult I have seen involved in violent confrontations with other Anutans was a man regarded as mentally ill (*varea*). In 1972, he was removed from Anuta to a psychiatric hospital in Honiara and the chiefs never permitted him to return home (see Feinberg 1979).

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