

TE MWAIE

Traditional Dance in Kiribati

Tony Whincup

(Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand)

Introduction

This paper explores the role of traditional dance in Kiribati, arguing that it provides a vital opportunity for the individual and group to establish and maintain boundaries essential for self-definition and self-recognition within contemporary society. The three inter-related aspects of place, preparation and performance of I-Kiribati dance provide sites for discussion. These areas make a chronological sense in relation to the dance process as well as being significant sites within which to analyse ethnographic material of photo-documentation and transcribed tape-recorded interviews .

(NB All quotations from I-Kiribati reproduced below are taken from interviews recorded on Kiribati in 1999).

Place

The central chain of sixteen atolls that form the core of Kiribati straddle the equator a little west of the international dateline. These atolls are remote, diminutive and physically very similar. They rise a mere two metres above sea level, forming narrow ribbons of land that entrap a shallow lagoon from the depths of the encircling Pacific Ocean. Coral dominates the land. There is little soil, and only the hardiest of plants survive – the coconut and pandanus trees being the most significant. There are no hills, no streams and little change in annual temperature or climate. The view from every reef, for every I-Kiribati, is the uninterrupted immensity of the Pacific Ocean. Such a view led Austin Coates to write:

You have only to stand on that beach, with the other just a few yards behind you, think of where you are – is it the end of the world or the beginning? – and look at the empty enormity in which your existence as an individual is placed; and everything from every angle in the view says ‘Why?’ (1970: 36)

The physical similarities of the atolls are echoed in their consistencies of social existence. Traditional skills, practices and values are common to all living generations. *Te mwaneaba* (the meeting house) is still a vital and central part of village life.



Figure 1 *Te mwaneaba* (the village meeting-house) is traditionally the focus of the social life of the community.

Photo by Tony Whincup (1999)

There are no dramatic changes in buildings, dress or forms of social behaviour, and the I-Kiribati language is spoken throughout the islands. The dynamics and structure of village life ensure transparency of activities and behaviour. Buildings are open in construction, and social restrictions, rather than physical barriers, provide basic privacy. Appropriate patterns of behaviour are clearly understood and maintained, and there has been limited integration with those of other nationalities. Extended families own all the land, which is divided up into thin strips running from lagoon to ocean, and marked by large coral slabs. Land may be 'loaned' but cannot easily be sold. The physical isolation, limited resources and little political significance, ensure a homogenous and stable culture. This isolation from diversity has meant that change has come slowly to Kiribati, particularly on the 'outer islands'. If, as Bourdieu suggests, "the struggle for recognition is a fundamental dimension of social life" (1987:33), the material limitations and controlled forms of

social expression could be seen to form a site of tension in the individual agency necessary to establish a sense of self.

This paper suggests that the continuing significance of dance in contemporary I-Kiribati society is in providing a vehicle that encourages uniqueness for small groups and individuals, within socially acceptable practices and behaviours.

Preparation

The preparation for dance comprises aspects of material culture and the physical development and rehearsal of the dance movements. The activities involved in the preparation for dance pervade virtually every part of I-Kiribati existence. Preparation draws together contemporary and historical orientations to the spiritual, skills and practices in the use of the atoll's natural resources, family values, and the inter-generational connectedness of social existence. Importantly, dance not only engages skills and underpinning spiritual associations associated with the production of material culture, but also provides a stimulus for the maintenance of these productions.

The limited resources on the islands directly impact upon the materials available for costumes and decorations. These materials are used with great ingenuity and creativity. Plants such as the coconut palm and its fruit, the pandanus tree, and a range of local flowers, are drawn into the complex and ancient methods of costume preparation. Skirts, dancing mats, belts, head and arm decorations are all produced from the atolls' few natural resources. Even the hair from female members of a dancer's family is used to make the symbolically important *te nuota*, or man's dancing belt. The preparation of the original raw materials – pandanus, coconut husks, shells, and so on - takes not only individual time, but a community or family commitment to garner sufficient of these hard won materials for the members of a village dance team. On the one hand these activities support and identify individual skills and status, and on other, they perpetuate communal activity.



Figure 2 *Te nuota* is a belt made of hair. The hair, specially cut from female members of the dancer's family, is woven into lengths long enough to wrap two or three times around the man's dancing mat.
Photo by Tony Whincup (1999)

The production of costumes and adornments involves not only skill and time but also a sense of commitment and care. Csikszentmihalyi has an interesting theory of "attendance" in which "it is convenient to think of attention as psychic energy because through its allocation ordered patterns of information and action are created" (1991: 5). It is argued that the energy given from a commitment of time and effort is transferred to the person, object or place of attendance. The costumes, *te mwaneaba* and the dancers themselves all receive 'attendance'. The intensity of the final performance could be argued to arise, in part, from it.

In all aspects of I-Kiribati life individuals are noted for their skills, such as the octopus catcher, the canoe or *mwaneaba* builder, and some are expert in the preparation of the dance costume. To maintain this recognition of a specific skill or knowledge, their methods are often kept secret from all but a limited circle of family members. The skills needed for the production of dance costumes are also the skills of survival – material gathering and preparation, social systems of magic, communal commitment and the practice of oral histories. In the specific is the maintenance of the general and vice versa.

Recently, contemporary look-alike materials have been introduced, for example, rubber brake piping replacing coconut ring belts, or strips of videotape being substituted for the black shiny palm fronds of dancing skirts, each directly reflecting changes in general social patterns:

You can see the changes now – using modern music, trying to put it in traditional dance – that’s one. Two, the costume – plastic is being used very often... But one interesting thing is since the introduction of videotapes. We’ve found that the worn out ones are used for skirts – instead of using blackened coconut. It’s a good size you know – just exactly as the more normal one and you don’t have to go to all the process of blackening the thing because its already black and shiny. (Bwere Eritaia)

Preparation for dance also includes music, words and movements. Each is the domain of a recognised and revered expert. The numerous different skills that comprise dance each have their associated procedures and magical associations. Each expert will have followed long and rigorous initiation procedures. From an awareness of this training, Toom Tanninga believes that:

... the dancers do respect me... Whatever advice I give them, they just obey it. This of course... happened as a result of traditional ritual that was performed for me when I was first commissioned to this. I still can feel that spiritual inspiration every time I stand up to lead the group. Sometimes when relaxing I could feel on my body something like a wind blowing slowly and penetrating into my skin. When this happens I know that I am possessed with the spirit of dance. I get up and put on my costume.

The secrets and magic associated with the successful performance of dance training, and musical composition, are passionately guarded. Sometimes the rehearsals of a particular dance technique will take place in the secrecy of a hidden location in the early hours of the morning. Within the tightly organised I-Kiribati community, these skills provide an opportunity to establish difference and, therefore, a sense of self. Such skills can be regarded as a symbolic capital that provides recognisable status and difference within the community.

Performance



Figure 3 “Akekeia!” – the word is echoed from side to side of the meeting-house. Again the arm is raised and the call “Akekeia!” brings the dancers to attention.
Photo by Tony Whincup (1999)

Dance is performed by both men and women, young and old. Its performance is the intense focal point of the skills, preparation and practice for the dancers and their families. The vigorous clapping and chanting of the chorus, and the stately controlled movements of the dancers, embody centuries of history in the minutiae of their movements and the words of the ancient songs. The songs speak of great battles, the legends of creation and migration, and of the ebb and flow of I-Kiribati life. Bewbwe Kanitio Tearo emphasises the significance of body movements in these tellings:

...the arm, head and eye movements should always follow the rhythm of the song and illustrate the meaning of the words. For example, the arm that stretched sideways with the forearm moving up and down, it illustrates the bird that flies up in the air. The arm horizontally moves forward or inward or outward in an up and down fast movement illustrates the movement of fish.

There are numerous forms of dance from the ancient and beautiful seated *te bino* to the dramatic standing dance *te buki*, in which a voluminous and heavy skirt is flicked from side to side. Each dance has its own particular meaning, costume, sequence and song.

Competing dance teams sit at opposing ends of the *mwaneaba*. Villagers and visitors crowd the sides of the meeting-house, sitting cross-legged on woven mats. To start, dancers move toward the centre of the *mwaneaba* and a chorus of men and women gather behind them. On one side of the team a male dancer will raise his arm, index finger pointing upward, and call “Akekeia!”, which brings the dancers to attention, and sets the pitch for the chant. The call “Akekeia” is echoed from side to side until the dancers are ready. A sense of timelessness pervades and yet the charged atmosphere is intensely of the present.

The traditions and history of the culture are maintained within these performances:

Most of the compositions refer to the history and legends of the country. Some are more recent than the others such as Nei Kimoauea and the King of Tarawa. Yes, and some of them like ‘kamei’ compositions tell information of important people and events in the past like the Second World War story. There is a well-known bino that tells about an aeroplane dropping bombs on an island. They are used as historical record. (Bewbwe Kanitio Tearo)

Dance is the distillation of virtually all forms of expression – poetry, song, history, movement and body adornment. Although there are suitable materials available, I am unaware of any traditional forms of carving or painting in Kiribati. The significance of the dance performance must be seen against its social context. In Kiribati, overtly demonstrative behaviour is frowned upon. Except within controlled situations, one does not ‘stand above others’, either in a conceptual sense of self-promotion, or on a physical level. Dance demands that people that present themselves as individuals or as a small group. During the dance they become the focal point of attention. This is in itself unusual, and the intensity of the moment is heightened by the lengthy preparations and the social significance of the venue.



Figure 4 Dressing in the traditional dance costume is no mere point of decoration. For many, a significant emotional shift occurs as they move from their day to day lives into the soul and history of an I-Kiribati dancer.

Photo by Tony Whincup (1999)

Dance, then, provides a rare, socially acceptable opportunity to publicly express emotion. The uniqueness and intensity of the moment combine to induce extreme emotions. Dancers will wail and cry, fall on the floor or have to be helped away in an uncontrollable state:

When I dance I feel great pleasure. In fact, there is a kind of emotion which is hard to define ... I always cry and my whole body shakes on its own accord. ... When the dance is finished, most would come back feeling drained and exhausted, some even fall shaking (Taua Tiito)

... you often see people burst into tears or scream in dancing It happens to me just when I'm watching too, because I'm singing along – there's just that energy that builds up and up in your body and you just cannot contain it. (Gretchen Hughes)

The dancers and the chorus are structured as two strongly contrasting parts of the one performance. The dancers remain seemingly aloof, as they time and again retrace their

precise and controlled movements, in contrast to the mounting energy and passion of the chorus. The performance can be seen as the site of struggle between the opposing forces of static and dynamic values. The dancers embody the static values of control, historical patterns and established expectations, whereas the chorus responds creatively and interacts spontaneously. The tension between the two is exquisite for both the performers and audience.

You will feel the hair of your skin stand especially when there is a strong stimulus sound of the song you dance to, and moreover when you start moving your head, arms and lift your leg or beat your chest, yes there is a feeling of great excitement. (Roota Mauri)

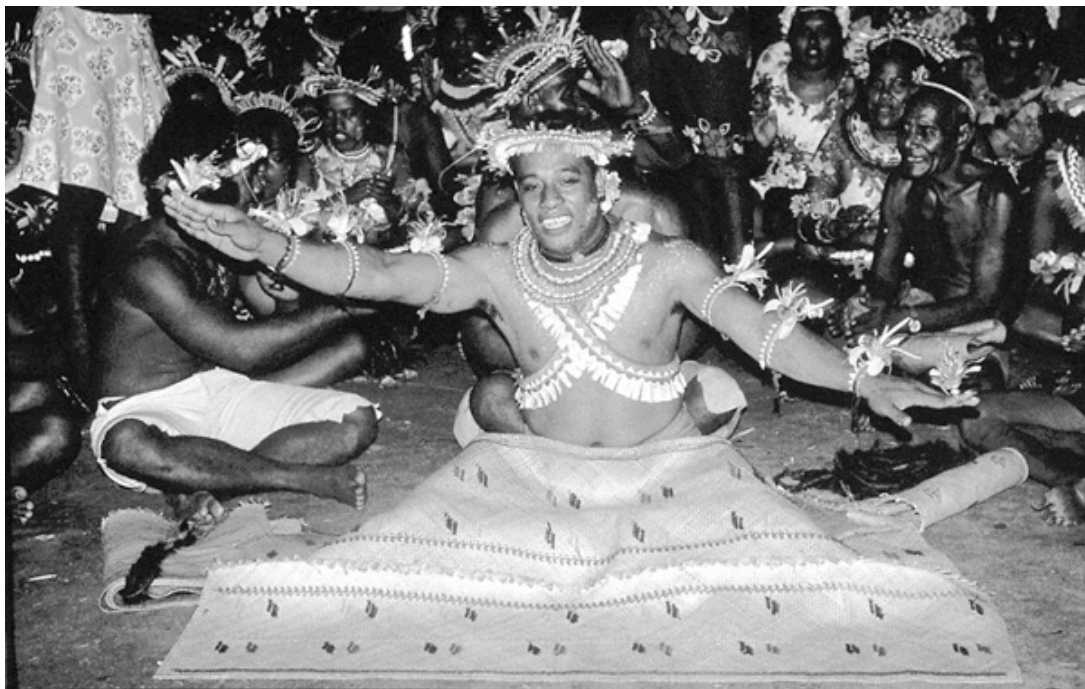


Figure 5 The ancient and beautiful sitting dance *te bino* deals with lyric poetry and particularly songs of love.

Photo by Tony Whincup (1999)

In recent years there have been shifts in the nature of the dance performance. Dance has always been competitive, but historically it was individual – for a man or woman to show themselves as the best within the group dancing. With the advent of greater emphasis upon village and inter-ministry competitions, the orientation has swung to rewarding group, rather than individual, excellence. The criteria in some cases are the accuracy and

unity of movement as a group. Some I-Kiribati feel this emphasis denies the quality of the exceptional individual performance that could not be attained by a group:

Dance itself is not a group competition, no, traditional dance is an individual dance competition – you compete with the one beside you – now it is changing to a group competition, a team competition. .. You can look at the thing from two perspectives – the old one, the individual competition – how good the body movement is, all those things. That's why the ladies, the young girls, they're not allowed to wear anything, they were topless ... you see this (navel) shaking with the breasts, that's a fail – it needs good control. So when you move your hips, the body is still - no movement.

Now the competition is as a group, they go for uniformity of movement... that's the major criteria ... They also judge the costume decoration... (Bwere Eritaia)

In contrast to the thinking of early missionaries, dance is now recognised by the Catholic Church. Traditional costumes and gestures of the dance are now integrated into many parts of the Catholic mass:

We are trying to encourage our youth, because the future of the church depends on that - the youth – and the more they participate in the mass and understand it, they can also know how to translate it into their lives, and very often, those who are participating (in the dancing) are the youths. (Bishop Paul Mea)

Overview

In traditional dance, the society of Kiribati has developed a vehicle that holds in balance the dialectical forces of difference and individuality (agency) in contrast with the social order (structure) and understood symbolic references. The cultural stability arising from agreed symbolic systems is under threat in post-modern societies as ambiguity arises from a lack of consensus of construction and interpretation of expressions. To maintain strongly held beliefs and personally appropriate ways of expression, the group and individual are forced to clarify and vigilantly maintain their personal boundaries through a cohesiveness of group practice. As the ability for symbolic systems to function depends to a large extent upon agreement as to their value and interpretation, the orientation of a society towards its social structures will be very much a determining factor in the effectiveness for group or self-definition to function as a part of these systems. It is not experiences that are at the heart of social differences, but rather the construction of the symbolic systems used in their expression. Yet expressions of experience equally well direct who we are as represent who we are. There is circularity in expression and experience. I would suggest that the constructors construct but are, in turn, constructed by their constructions. “Therefore it seems more correct to think of self-awareness as a process of self-control rather than a static moment of apperception” (Csikszentmihalyi,

1981:3). As the practices of dance shift and adapt to ever more divergent external influences, so too will the 'self' mirrored in their performances.

If dance, indeed the I-Kiribati way of life, is to provide for self-definition and recognition, it has been argued that there need to be opportunities for establishing and maintaining difference. It is through difference that the 'other' can be recognised – boundaries of some sort are needed to establish an inner and an outer. I would argue that the development of an awareness of self is arrived at retrospectively, out of witnessing consistent patterns, revealed and maintained in the concrete expressions of our experiences. As Bourdieu suggests, it is in the recognition of "everything which distinguishes it from what it is not and especially from everything it is opposed to; social identity is defined and asserted through difference" (Bourdieu, 1979: 172). The performance of I-Kiribati dance is the culmination of costume preparation, song compositions, dance choreography and rehearsal, magical practices and so on. In the controlled, stable and even pattern of Kiribati existence, the dance performance is made even more extra-ordinary through contrast.

Perhaps there is no one singular purpose for dance in Kiribati, but the numerous activities necessary for its production involve skills of material culture, maintenance of traditional beliefs in magic and the spiritual world, the oral histories embodied in the songs' lyrics, and the psychological release provided by dance as public expression. Time and again, I-Kiribati said that involvement with dance provided them with a sense of recognition and a pride in their cultural identity.

[Dance] is the expression of joy and sorrow, maybe love, friendship being expressed through the dance in the highest way – so dancing in Kiribati, I think, is one of the highest forms of expression. It's a way of bringing the community together, participating in certain celebrations, that's why you develop this sense of unity in the community through dance – ummh – also beginning to appreciate your own culture. It gives joy to the people, they cannot celebrate without dance. Also the preparation of dance takes a long time, so in doing that they really develop their sense of unity towards the community - it's a way of educating our young people, participating in their culture especially in dances – so dance is their centre of our life really ... this is the way of our highest point of expressing our emotions and feelings about life and relationship between one another and also the relationship with the invisible world, the spirit, all in the dance; so it's a big wealth for us and a very rich expression of our life through the dances. (Bishop Paul Mea)

Through dance, the important aspects of culture are maintained inter-generationally, and a mode of social and psychological well-being is established in a recognition of self. As Roota Mauri so succinctly puts it, "this is our culture and identity, we are known as I-Kiribati from the way we dance ... That is why I love my traditional dance very very much. I love it because it is my identity".

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