

Transculturation in Yapese music: a discussion of terminology and some observations in relation to specific musical styles found on Yap island.

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What is transculturation?

Since the turn of the century many writers and researchers have explored the concept of 'culture contact', the impinging of two cultures upon one another and the results of such contact. The results can be observed in many areas of our own culture. Until fairly recently the term 'acculturation' was generally used to describe the processes and results of culture contact. Certainly it was much better than other expressions borrowed from botany, anthropology and the like, many of which were used as analogies and frequently misinterpreted as reflecting the negative side of cultural interchange. According to Margaret Kartomi, acculturation has ambiguities as well, but transculturation implies no set standard and therefore no aesthetic difference between music of 'pure' and 'mixed' genres.¹ Transculturation is used to describe the process of culture contact.

The process of transculturation can take place in many ways and for many reasons. Kartomi suggests that the results of transculturation are reflected in six main types of cultural response: 'virtual rejection of an impinging music', 'transfer of discrete musical traits', 'pluralistic coexistence of musics', 'nativistic musical revival', 'musical abandonment', and 'musical impoverishment'. Ultimately, transculturation results in the creation of a new musical form out of two or more separate musical cultures. The initial impulse for musical transculturation tends to be extramusical and once transculturation is complete and has been accepted by members of that society as representative of their musical identity, then the processes of musical transculturation can begin again. In summary, it is possible to come to the conclusion that musical transculturation can be seen as the normal process of change within music.

Musical transculturation on Yap island

Yap is a small island in the Western Caroline Islands of Micronesia (see Illustration 1). It is a

high island, formed from the tip of an underwater mountain and is divided up into ten municipalities shared between four islands, Maap, Rumung, Tomil-Gagil and Yap proper. The total land mass is approximately 49 square miles. The population speaks Yapese and either English or Japanese and there are six and a half thousand inhabitants on Yap.

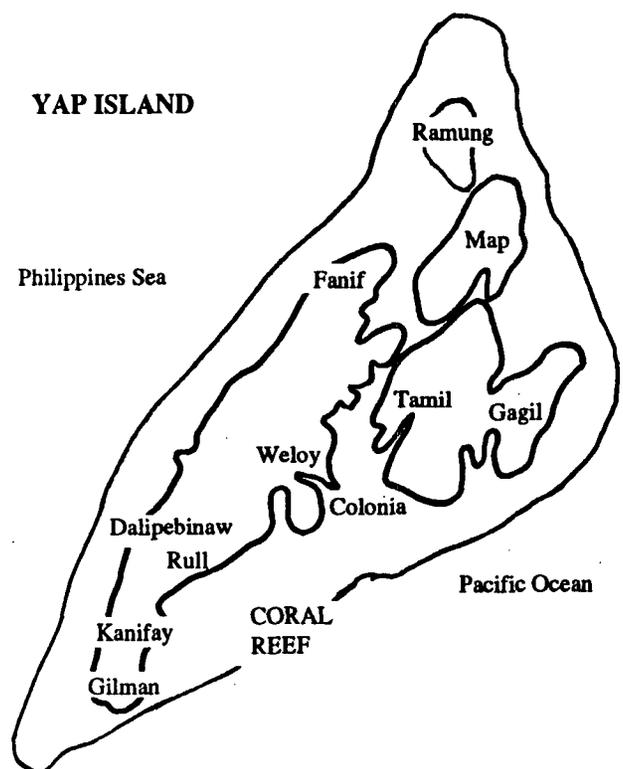


Illustration 1: Yap island

Micronesia is made up of two main cultural types, those on high islands which have a secure landbase with a coastline and fertile soil, and those on coral atolls whose existence is much more precarious and dependent on the ocean and the weather. Traditionally the people of high islands have dominated those of the coral atolls.

In the past, Yap, as a high island, built up an empire in which the neighbouring coral atolls of Ulithi, Ngulu, Sorol and Fais were tributary, tribute

being paid mainly in the form of *churu*, or dance-chant. In the past century, however, Yap has been possessed by four different colonial powers: Spain, Germany, Japan and the United States. Each of these has had some impact musically on the island. Today the influence of the early Spanish missionaries can be found in the Catholic church service (many of the hymns being Spanish melodies with Yapese lyrics), and the influence of the United States in both the music of the church, and in popular song. Traditional song, a chant with limited range and strict duple time, is no longer performed.

Only two traditional instruments have been documented, the *ngal*, a four-hole, end-blown, external duct flute, and the *uchif*, an 'oboe' or reedpipe made of coconut pinna twisted into a spiral (see Illustration 2), neither of which is now made or played. Neither instrument appears to have had a repertoire or particular playing technique and only the barest details are available about them.

Song, in the form of an American-based 'pop' style, is popular, with one local band being given airplay on WSZA, Yap's only radio station, at the time of my field trip.² The most popular combination for 'pop' music is keyboard and voice.

Apart from traditional Spanish hymn tunes, there have been more recent additions to the repertoire of the Catholic church choirs. Polyphony, it should be noted, is not a part of Yapese song style. Traditional Yapese vocal style is a chant with an ascending melodic line, a very narrow range of approximately e to b, with the largest interval being g to b. The newer hymns have been introduced by American Jesuits who have taken over from their Spanish colleagues. These new hymns are often built on traditional carols, or else have been created by members of the choirs from popular melodies, for example 'Kyib Fare Ra'en' uses the Simon and Garfunkel tune, 'Sounds of Silence'. Church music is generally sung unaccompanied, although occasionally guitar or keyboard is used. Recently the Yapese have been

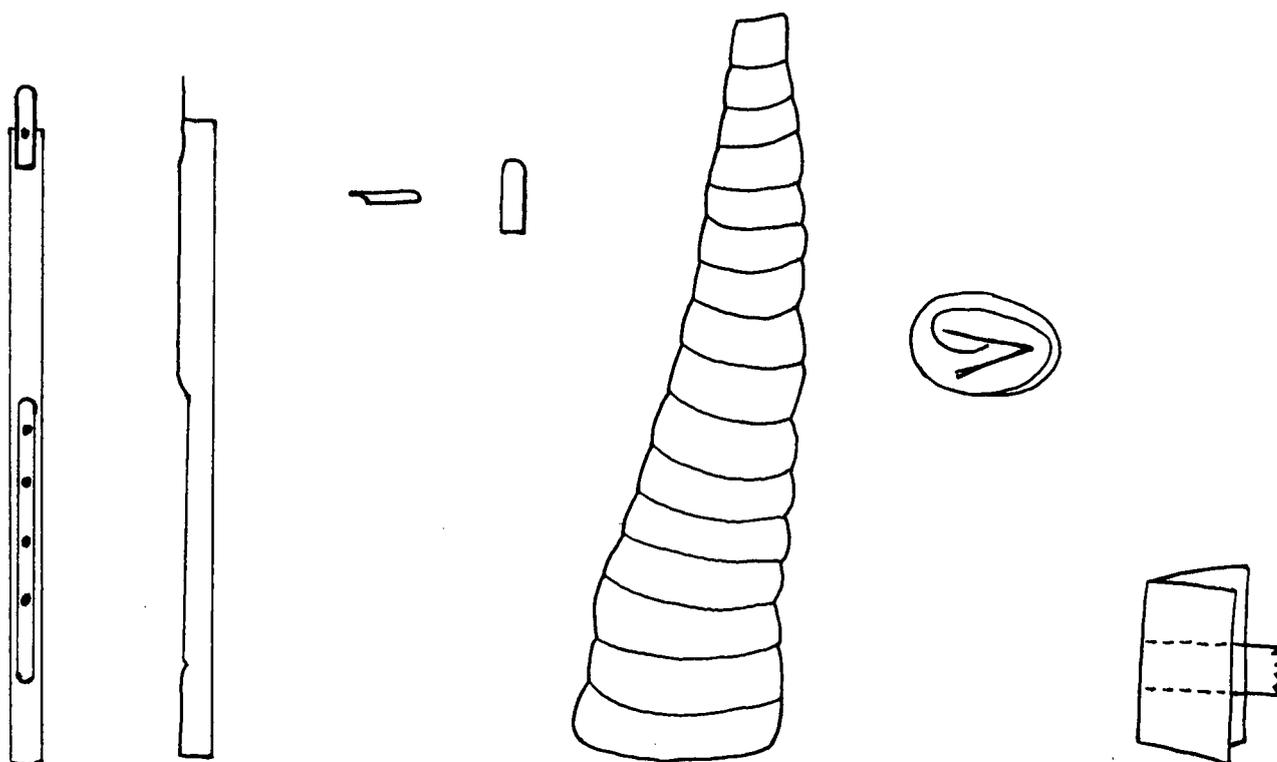


Illustration 2: (left to right) *ngal* viewed from the front; *ngal* viewed from the side; *ngal* mouthpiece from the side; *ngal* mouthpiece from the front; *uchif*; *uchif* seen from above; top of *uchif* seen from the side.

encouraged to perform their traditional dance and chant for special religious celebrations, such as Christmas and Easter. Consequently, (Elvira) Tinag, an old woman from Rull municipality, has created a number of new dances with religious themes, the most recent of which (at the time of my field trip) was a 'Trinity' dance created for Christmas mass, 1989. These dances are performed inside the church by a line of dancers who are successively yelled at by the congregation. There have been concerns about the possible loss of traditional chant and dance which is possibly why Syne'.

Transculturation has occurred on Yap. Using Kartomi's categories, four major types of transculturation can be observed: both virtual rejection and musical revival in the dance/chant tradition, musical abandonment of traditional songs and musical instruments, and musical impoverishment as evidenced by hymns and the American-style 'pop' band, Kamaka. It is possible that the adoption of Western song styles paralleled the decline in traditional song styles.

The main reason for the change in song styles was, naturally, the coming of the missionaries. The demands of the church, the banning of traditional musical styles, the introduction of hymns and Christian values all would have contributed to the undermining of traditional values and led to a restructuring of roles and lifestyles. Later the US introduced radio and television and the islanders were no longer isolated from the rest of the world. New values are being introduced from the west coast of America. Yap is now undergoing a further shift in values and traditions, and, no doubt, there will be more changes in the music as the people rethink their position in the Pacific. Already there is some adoption of harmonies from the Polynesian-influenced islands of the Eastern Carolines, and I observed a number of attempts at polyphony during my stay on Yap. They were not very successful, but maybe, in time, polyphonic singing, music for guitar and keyboard, and hymns written by locals will become accepted alongside chant as part of the traditional music of Yap.

NOTES

¹ Margaret J. Kartomi, 'The Processes and Results of Musical Culture Contact: A Discussion of Terminology and Concepts', *Ethnomusicology* 25 (May 1981), p. 234.

² This paper was written after I returned from Yap in 1990. There has been a slight shift in the styles of music being broadcast on WSZA since then.

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