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Figure 1a. A wooden dance-club obtained by Julius Brenchley from San Cristobal (Makira) in 1865 (c.6304, length 77 cm).



Figure 1b. A wooden dance-club obtained by Charles F. Wood on Makira in about 1870 at a place he called 'Onuna Bay' (c.7629, length 78 cm).

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42 Dance clubs of south-east Solomon Islands

Michael W. Scott

Dance clubs and the dances in which they figure are among the many cultural forms shared through a longstanding inter-island network comprising the islands of Makira (also called San Cristobal), Santa Ana, Santa Catalina, Ugi, Ulawa and south Malaita. Descriptions and images by both Europeans and Islanders provide insights into the uses and meanings of these often plain, but graceful and evocative, objects.

The Marist missionary Léopold Verguet seems to have been the first European to witness and later publish an account of dance clubs in use in the south-east Solomons. In 1846, during a feast that the people of one village hosted for the inhabitants of several others, he observed a dance employing such clubs at Makira Harbour on the south-west coast of Makira. The hosts had prepared their usual festival fare – a fermented pudding called *taumwa* (the famous 'six-month pudding' of Makira) made of mashed tubers with coconut milk and crushed *canarium* nuts – which they had arranged in a group of large, decorated wooden bowls (cf. BM Oc1990,Q.86). After the food had been laid out, but before it was distributed, a group of young men from the host village performed for their guests:

They are dressed up in their finest ornaments, the dark colour of their skin enhancing the whiteness of their cowrie shells and their mother of pearl, a comb with a long red tassel embellishing their heads – many have lightened their hair with lime – numerous necklaces of strung shell beads flowing over their backs and breasts; all the young men are wearing a skirt of coconut fronds which they put on only for the dance. And now, before taking part in the feast, they go to perform one of their dances before the visitors, their friends.

These dances are captivating to see on account of the order that governs them and the uniformity

of the dancers' movements. Nothing indecent ever happens: only the men engage in this custom; the women make do with watching. Before dancing, the men arrange themselves in rows of four by four and crouch down on their haunches, each holding a ceremonial club in his right hand. This is a small curved club, very light and decorated with designs. On each hand and foot they wear castanets made from the shells of a certain type of nut which, when they strike each other, make a sound like that of sleigh bells. The leader of the dance sings a couplet in a nasal tone; all the others repeat the refrain. I could understand only a few words of their song; it alluded to fishing, 'Soon,' the leader sang, 'night will spread its shadow over the deep sea; we will return to our homes. Tomorrow with the rising of the sun, we will come back cheerfully to the catch. [*Roto po i matawa*] ...

The dance starts up little by little. During the first couplets, the seated dancers simply keep time with their clubs. Then they rise together, stepping now on one leg, now on the other; while making all the same movements, they extend their clubs to the right, then to the left. Their song becomes more powerful. They advance on the right foot, fall back on the left, make a half turn, and repeat the same movements, now to one side, now to the rear, without ceasing to sing. They go through their progressions and stop only when they are running with sweat after a good quarter of an hour's exertion. The dance having ended, they head off to the feast house and help with the distribution of food.

(Verguet 1885:199–201, author's translation; cf. 1854:176; Webster 1863:102–4; Wood 1875:121)

Today, many south-east Solomon Islanders still perform such dances as colonial, Christian, and post-colonial transformations of a continuous tradition. In fact, I encountered similar dances and songs when I first conducted anthropological field research with the Arosi of the north coast of west Makira in the early 1990s. But I learned about them when my Arosi

consultants in Tawatana village persuaded me to join their practice sessions, as they prepared what they termed ‘entertainments’ for an imminent visit by their Anglican bishop. Our troupe was also on the bill for the celebration of Christmas day and a wedding, along with sketches and newly introduced or ‘made up’ dances.

The men who taught me their traditional dances explained that, in the Arosi language, the dance club is called a *mada ni mao* (literally, ‘club of dancing’) or simply *mada*. They distinguished, furthermore, between dances with the *mada* (*mao ni mada*) and those in which the hands must be free for clapping (*mao ni hida*).

The repertoire of dances with the *mada* which I learned were of two main types: those which refer to fishing, including the ritualized practices which accompanied deep-sea bonito fishing in pre-Christian times, and those which refer to warfare. The idea that the curved blade of the club can represent the prow of a canoe is well established in the literature on Sa’a, Small Malaita (Ivens 1927:168, 234). Some Arosi may also understand the *mada* in this way, but I did not hear this interpretation. One of my teachers, the late Paul Dururongo, instructed me that the *mada* represents a shield and that, as he put it, ‘in the past these dances weren’t just dances; they were practice for warfare’. According to Paul, the gestures the dancers make with the *mada* simulate fending off spears (cf. Davenport 1968:21). Comparative data from elsewhere in the region suggest that a larger, sturdier type of club may once have been used in war dances (e.g. Conru 2002: 239 no. X180; cf. BM OC1886,0212.8; OC1927,-99), but Arosi now use the smaller *mada* type whenever dancing with clubs.

In contrast to the carefully worked and decorated dance clubs in the British Museum, the clubs we used might be described as utility versions. They had the classic curved blade and short handle, but lacked decorative carving or other embellishment. A number of early ethnographic sources suggest that dance clubs were stored in the rafters of large, sacred canoe houses, which were the centres of masculine social life and rest houses for male visitors and, in Verguet’s words, ‘museums where the masterpieces of Arosi industry are assembled together’ (1854:135; cf. Bernatzik 1936: plate



22). Although Arosi no longer build such elaborate canoe houses, the people of Tawatana kept the *mada* we used in the rafters of the village guest-house.

My Arosi teachers agreed that the dances we were rehearsing had come from spirits who, long ago, had revealed them to people through dreams. Accordingly, they had a second term for these dances: *mao ni adaro* (dance of the spirits). One especially beautiful story tells how the shade of a sleeping man was conducted by a spirit of the deep sea to a sandy beach, where he watched the spirits of people who had drowned on the inundated island of Henuaasi dancing in the surf (Fox 1924:124). The Anglican missionary ethnographer Walter G. Ivens reports similar ideas among the people of Ulawa and Sa’a, and notes two cases from Ulawa in which dance-club designs, as well as dance steps, were given in dreams (1927:14, 143, 169, 205–7). Proper names (e.g. ‘Talk-of-Feasts’) and stories of their origin and makers could be attached to particular clubs, giving them special renown and value (Ivens 1927:168, 234).

Figure 2. James Maesiria (right of centre) performs a traditional dance with club (*mao ni mada*) in honour of visiting novices of the Anglican Melanesian Brotherhood at Tawatana village in July 1993 (photograph by Michael W. Scott).



Figure XX. A comb of wood with palm-leaf tassels, from (OC1920,0322.40, 41, or 42)

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Significantly, several people in Tawatana – Arthur Oro’irimanisau, Michael Ngaraediri and Casper Kaukeni – asserted that the dances I was learning had not been dreamed by local people, but had actually come from Ulawa or one of the other smaller islands north of Makira. The people of Tawatana and many other Arosi villages had learned, adopted and – each in their own way – customized the dances during a long history of formal visits between Ulawa and the

other islands surrounding Makira (cf. Mead 1977:149–54). Such reciprocal visits were occasions for feasting and many forms of social, cultural and material exchange, including dancing. Some visits were long enough for mutual cultural instruction (cf. Ivens 1927:39–41). By this means, dance forms became both regionally shared and locally varied, and club designs as well as clubs probably circulated as gifts. Although they are often performed as part of the same event, Arosi are quick to differentiate between traditional dances received through spirits and pre-colonial inter-island relations, and contemporary ‘made up’ dances, none of which employs the dance club. Yet the ‘made-up’ dances entail a similar pattern of borrowing and modifying from a variety of sources, including other islands in the Solomons, other Pacific nation-states, disco and the video performances of Michael Jackson.

Vibrant as these new dances are, the old dances and songs retain a special power to produce an affective response and sense of connection among people across time as well as distance. Sakias Kahoa liked to tell how a young man from Tawatana named Sahu had been involved in organizing a dance while attending King George VI School near Honiara. Sahu and some other boys from Arosi taught the boys from south Malaita some of the dances of ‘Ubuna, a village just west of Tawatana. One young man from south Malaita broke down and wept when he heard the words they were singing because, as Kahoa said, ‘he remembered his old people’. The dances can still evoke a feeling of mutuality across generations and, for some, even between humans and spirits. As Casper Kaukeni explained, when people danced, ‘in the past we believed the *adaro* [spirits] were there too’. It was perhaps this power of the dance to link people and the spirit realm that once made the dance club a tool for divination (Ivens 1927:345).