

The morality of *mweki*: Performing sexuality in the 'Islands of Love'

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Trobriand dance is a key cultural expression and a means of communicating subjectivity in a number of ways: it expresses aspects of kinship, gender, morality, and ideas about modernity and primitivity. In a region with a long history of Christian missions, coupled with a recent 'Revival' brought about by the arrival of Pentecostal forms of worship, certain dances come to be key markers of particular moral positions. Primary among these is the Tapioca Dance, famed far beyond the Trobriands, but problematic in local discourses and practice. This paper examines the ways in which such dances make sexuality public, and why this is such a concern for 'Revived' (and other) Christian Trobriand Islanders.

Keywords: Trobriand Islands, Tapioca Dance, performance, Christianity, gender

INTRODUCTION

In the Trobriand Islands, performances of traditional dance are perhaps the most emblematic of cultural expressions. Trobrianders are fiercely proud of the beauty and skill demonstrated in the bodies and traditional finery of dancers. Despite the Islands' reputation as the 'Islands of Love', dance performances are in fact a rare instance in which Trobriand sexuality is on public display in an overt manner. Generally, traditional taboos and Christian morality ensure that sex is a private matter. This paper examines Trobriand dance, especially the often locally controversial performances of the provocative and infamous Tapioca Dance, as a site in which the private is made public in distinctly gendered ways. This is by no means unproblematic for Trobrianders themselves, who are torn between a reflexive awareness of their unique cultural and anthropological heritage, a desire to have fun, and a sense of obligation to follow Church teachings. The discourses invoked in the local debates about Tapioca Dance and other aspects of Trobriand performance and ritual, which some see as unchristian, are illuminating of the competing values at play, especially in a context in which relatively recently arrived Pentecostal churches have created a 'Revival' movement which in itself stands in contrast to longer-standing Trobriand churches. At public meetings, in church groups and on verandas throughout the islands, Trobrianders assess and re-assess their priorities and allegiances as they debate the rightful place of Tapioca dance as an aspect of Trobriand culture. In this sense, it represents a moral dilemma, the

examination of which can, following Barker (2007: 1), make visible key value orientations of a society and local responses to changing social conditions.

Alexeyeff (2009: 13) argues that:

... dance, because of its visual and affective immediacy, is a particularly productive arena for the performance and contestation of important personal and social identities. Dance is compelling because it communicates at affective and embodied levels as well as cognitive ones. Important messages are conveyed in performances through adhesion to, or departure from, tradition in movements, musical accompaniment, lyrics, and elements of dress. And these messages are in turn interpreted by those who observe the performance, with or without the cultural knowledge held by the performers.

Indeed, in the Trobriand Islands, the style of dress, the nature of the movements executed by the dancers, and the audience (that is, locals or visitors) are both a statement of intent about the kind of moral person one purports to be, and a presentation of a gendered body in a particular way. As Reed (1998: 516) points out, dance is a means by which cultural ideologies of gender difference are reproduced. The meaning of performance is the imagery that it enacts and evokes (Palmer and Jankowiak 1996: 229), an imagery in this case which is gendered, historicised, and evokes a position or relation to both church and 'custom'. A performance of Trobriand-ness through dance, whether 'from the ancestors' or contemporary, in traditional or western dress is, in a sense, a political act:

Culture-as-performance reflects or comments upon self and others. Performers project and register images and interpretations of themselves, of others, and of the life of the community itself ... Participants see or imagine the larger image in the collective performance, and they see themselves within that performance as actors, as conceptual products of its enactment, and as the targets of cultural commentary fashioned by performance. [Palmer and Jankowiak 1996: 240]

The event of performance is interpreted in a culturally-specific context and can be seen, in a way analogous to material objects, as having a meaning that can only be elucidated by reference to the system that creates and produces those meanings (Strathern 2013: 160). These images and interpretations reflect orientations to the past and the future, ancestor spirits and church leaders, discourses of 'right' and 'wrong' behaviours, and gendered morality.

Trobriand dance can be understood as, in its essence, a feminine activity; when bodies (men, women, and children) are dressed and anointed with oil, powder and leaves for dancing 'their powers of beauty and attraction are inner feminine powers that have been externalised onto their skins' (Mosko 2013: 493). While he gives as an explanation that beauty, as locally conceived, is an attribute of women, while undecorated men are 'ugly' (Mosko 2013: 493), I would extend this to suggest that dancing might further be considered feminine as it is associated with the harvesting of yams, a time when fecundity and reproduction are highly visible in the large heaps of neatly stacked tubers. Normative sexuality, it must be noted, is in the Trobriand context (both inside and outside the Christian framework) highly dependent on a male-female

gender dichotomy, with heteronormativity of key importance to ensuring affinal linkages and securing the perpetuation of matrilineal clans. Further, dancing is also associated with feasting, and excessive consumption is also associated with women (*cf* Munn 1986: 220). However, as I explain below, the creation of masculinised forms of this generally feminine activity is an inversion that raises concern among many Trobrianders.

In this paper, I present an analysis of gender relations, and in some cases discomfort, about the moral righteousness of dance performances. My analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork wherein I attended (and participated in, in various ways) the full spectrum of Trobriand dance performances in a number of different venues (school cultural days, community and church-sponsored events, tourist performances), as well as attending community and church meetings, and listening to the gossip that sometimes followed particular performances and events. I examine not only how people display themselves—their bodies, as representative of Trobriandness, clan affiliation (including rank), and gender ideals—but also how others interpret that display through the discourses that surround public performance. For example, the sometimes graceful, sometimes ribald movements enacted by the dancers may be received with appreciation, mirth, or even outrage. I look at the ways in which the ideals of Christianity, especially in the Revival or Pentecostal religious movements, create an understanding of femininity as morally threatening and in need of containment (see also Eriksen, this volume). This is manifested not only in changing valuations of dance performances as ‘good’ or ‘bad/evil/sinful’, but also in a shift away from the practice of other overtly feminine or feminised public activities in which the reproductive body is on display, as I discuss towards the end of this paper. In this way, I hope to shed some light on the ways in which Christianity intersects with Trobrianders’ expectations regarding gender relations (or perhaps complementarity, per Sanders (2008)) and ideals of masculinity and femininity.

SEX AND SIN IN ‘THE ISLANDS OF LOVE’

The enduring trope of the Trobriands as the ‘Islands of Love’ continues to inform representations and perceptions of Trobriand ways of life. Though he never used the term, the publication of Malinowski’s *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* made famous the sexual freedoms enjoyed (within significant limitations) by young, unmarried Trobrianders (Malinowski 1929). The trope has since been perpetuated through provocative presentations of Trobriand culture in popular media, such as magazine articles and films, as well as through promotional material for tourism (Pfund 1972; Allen 1988; Senft 1998; Bennett 1999; McKinnon et al. 2008; MacCarthy 2012, 2016). While the Western idealisation of a place of unfettered sexual freedom has provoked much interest in the islands, it is neither accurate nor the kind of attention most Trobrianders today wish to receive. As Christianity plays an important role in the lives of Trobriand Islanders, many are actively resistant to this stereotype.

There are several Christian denominations represented in the Trobriand Islands: the United Church has the highest number of adherents, followed by Catholicism, newly arrived Pentecostal churches such as Rhema, Four Square, and Christian Revival Church (CRC), and (with only a few churches), Seventh Day Adventists. Only a few of the most evangelical of churches outright condemn dance performed in traditional dress (which requires women to bare their breasts), but in all churches there is an implicit suggestion that certain 'moral values' should be upheld, and there are clear divisions, especially in the dress considered appropriate for women, between performances at cultural shows or for tourist audiences on the one hand, and church functions on the other (see e.g. Dundon 2002; Van Heekeren 2011, for analyses elsewhere in PNG). In the Christian context, unclothed bodies take on new connotations as sinful and in need of covering, even as idealised views of Trobriand sexual freedom depend on the exposure of those bodies.

Of particular concern are the embodied actions and often explicitly sexual lyrics associated with *mweki*, specifically the Tapioca Dance (see also MacCarthy 2013). While not considered 'traditional' by Trobrianders, it is nonetheless perhaps the best known of all Trobriand dances; Lepani (2012: 12) calls it 'the signature dance' of the Trobriands. Tapioca Dance is a ribald performance of pelvic thrusting, buttock-slapping, hooting and gyrating, often accompanied by sexually explicit lyrics (Fig. 1). It is usually performed in public by groups of young men, though *mweki* may be incorporated into dances performed by both genders, and even very young children often imitate this dance. The act of *mweki*, a pelvic thrusting movement (it can also be used to refer to sexual intercourse), has in fact been incorporated into public performance since time immemorial; when young men and women carried yams from the gardens to the village at harvest time, an activity referred to as *gogebila*, and in nighttime dancing during *milamala*, the period of dancing and other social and sexual activity accompanying and immediately following the yam harvest (Malinowski 1916: 1929). However, in the past, certain restraints were also expected. While discreet sexual freedom was both permissible and even encouraged for unmarried adolescent boys and girls alike, this was always to be carried out outside the public gaze. In his chapter on Morals and Manners in *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia*, Malinowski observes that:

'Though licence in speech is allowed and enjoyed in the right company, great restraint is always observed in public as regards action. In vain would one look in the Trobriands for traces and survivals of the untrammelled licence and lust alleged to have existed in primeval times . . . To the natives sexual publicity is definitely objectionable' (Malinowski 1929: 478).

Malinowski states unequivocally that 'representations of sexual matters are completely absent from . . . dancing' (1929: 397), as well as stressing that whilst there is a heightened eroticism at the time of post-harvest festivities and dancing, such dances are never directly associated with sex (1929: 249). Trobriand and Christian moral standards are in agreement on this matter. However, Malinowski does not suggest a



Figure 1 Men from Yalumgwa Ward, Kiriwina Island perform *mweki*. Photo by author.

difference between the moral codes for women and men, which, I suggest, become significant only in the Christian context.

Tapioca Dance was created during a period of innovation in dance and song following World War II, influenced by the presence of Allied soldiers on Kiriwina, the biggest Trobriand island. It was one of many dances created specifically for performance during inter-village cricket matches, in which each participating village had its signature dance. Thus, in its origin, it was performed as part of cricket games by the young (married or unmarried) men who participated in such matches, but today is frequently included in dances performed for visiting tourists and public servants, who may know little about Trobriand culture more generally, but have heard about the ‘famous’ Tapioca Dance. Trobrianders of all denominations are well aware of the relatively recent origin of the Tapioca Dance, and are quick to point out that it is not a ‘traditional’ dance, even while many still very much enjoy performing and being spectators to these dances.

It must be remembered that this development was firmly within the era of a thoroughly missionised Trobriand milieu, and thus is a creation that rather explicitly challenges, while being understood and interpreted in the context of, Christian moral values. Indeed, it might be argued that it was created to be self-consciously sexually charged and to parody the ‘traditional’ forms of dance considered to be inherited from the ancestors. The dance represents a long history of moral politics and debates about attitudes towards gender, sex, bodies, and pleasure. It is perhaps the very fact of missionisation and the introduction of Christian ideas that facilitated a new and innovative way to break the rules—both those of rigid Christian ideals of morality, and even deep-seated Trobriand moral precepts.

If, as Mosko (2013: 493) argues, Trobriand dancing is considered to be an essentially feminine activity, Tapioca Dance is perhaps the most masculinised expression of a feminised expressive form and can be seen as an expression of complementarity of gender relations (cf Strathern 1992, Sanders 2008; see also Mosko 2013: 494). It is also problematised as transgressive in various ways. Tapioca Dance uses the basic form of *mweki*, but exaggerates the forward thrusting movements of the pelvis and incorporates slapping of the buttocks to be explicitly and unequivocally not only sexual, but sexually aggressive. This in itself is considered by many, especially those closely aligned with one or another of the churches, to push the boundaries of public propriety. But it is not only the eyes that face moral corruption by witnessing a performance of Tapioca Dance. The ears are also susceptible. Beyond the moral pitfalls of the sensual aspects of Trobriand traditional dress and the sexually suggestive movements incorporated into Tapioca Dance are the ribald and even offensive lyrics that often are associated with dancing *mweki*, which Senft (1999: 26) identifies as ‘songs with rather blunt sexual allusions’. He translates some of these, and it is not difficult to determine why religious leaders might take issue with them. For example, Senft describes one stanza of a *mweki* dance he saw performed for visiting tourists and translates it thus (1999: 27):

<i>Iutu beya akeya vila</i>	It pokes inside, I fuck cunts
<i>Nupisivau iutu beya akeya vila</i>	New full beautiful breasts, it pokes inside here, I fuck cunts
<i>Ipaisewa nupisivau akeya vila</i>	It works, new full beautiful breasts, I fuck cunts

The verbs *-ke*, *-keya*, or *-ketau* Trobrianders will generally translate into English as ‘fuck’ (in the right company, i.e., not when people in a *tabu*¹ relationship are within earshot). This connotes pleasure, and the freedom that young people enjoy to pursue unencumbered sexual encounters; it is not appropriate to use it to describe sex between a husband and wife. It also suggests a certain wildness that is not inherent in euphemisms like *i masisisi kasiteyu* (they sleep together). In the lyrics above, it is clearly the man’s perspective, as penetrator, being described. The aggressive male action is accompanied by aggressive male language, which is rather in contrast with Trobriand ideals of equality in sexual freedom and pleasure. It is also in contradiction with the still very salient cross-sex sibling and father-daughter sexual *tabu*, which dictates that nary the slightest whiff of anything sexual in nature should transpire in the shared company of people in such a *tabu* relationship. When asked why Tapioca Dance might be considered shameful, sinful, or ‘bad’, Trobrianders are as likely to cite this *tabu* as a reference to God, the Bible, or the church.

Nonetheless, the church is both a forum and a justification for advocating behavioural change. Indeed, in many ways Tapioca Dance comes to stand for, and even parody, all that is *not* proper, morally upright Christian behaviour. These lyrics, which pastors say are ‘not pleasing to the ears of Christians’, and the sexualised actions of *mweki*, are frequently the subject of tirades by church leaders and elders. In one public meeting I attended in a predominantly Catholic village, an elder spoke out against

what he called 'inappropriate' dancing. 'We should take only what is good in Trobriand culture and mesh it with Christianity', he said, arguing that provocative dancing is 'the work of Satan'. United Church leaders, too, are clear about the moral risks of salacious public performances. When one pastor made it clear that he would not tolerate *mweki* at a feast to celebrate a United Church opening, some villagers were disappointed, as many people still see *mweki*, if not the more aggressively lewd Tapioca Dance, as a way to 'show how they are happy', as one of my Trobriand friends put it. In fact, the pastor insisted that no *yobuwa* (the pandanus or areca-leaf wrap covering the male genitalia) or *doba* (generally, textiles made from banana leaves, but in this case the distinctive short red skirts worn in traditional dancing by women -and, in a few particular dances, men) be worn, as this was sure to instigate *mweki* or other unchristian behaviour. Pentecostal church leaders are also adamant about the need for propriety, and are more likely to make gendered distinctions. Patrick, a local Pentecostal pastor, told me that when women dance in traditional dress, they do so to attract attention from men. This tempts men to sin. He noted that both church teachings and what he called 'modern culture' tell women not to expose their breasts. He admitted that it is hard for people to change, but that 'to be good Christians, we [Trobrianders] have to decide what in culture to keep, and what to leave behind'.

'REVIVING' TROBRIAND CHRISTIANITY

It is necessary, at this point, to digress briefly to outline the historical development of Christian conversion in the Trobriand Islands. Christianity both is, and is not, a monolithic entity in the islands. It is pervasive and unified in that virtually all Trobrianders, like most Papua New Guinians in this avowedly Christian nation, identify themselves with one or another of the Christian denominations represented in the islands. Most Trobrianders are quick to point out that despite the plurality of churches, all worship *guyau tetala wala* (one and the same God). However, there are some differences that can generally be distinguished between the official Catholic stance on pre- or non-Christian activities, such as secular dance performances, *kula* exchanges, and mortuary distributions on the one hand; and more fundamentalist Pentecostal or 'Revival' beliefs on the other.

The first missionary to establish a mission station in Kiriwina, the largest and most densely populated of the Trobriand Islands, was the Methodist Rev SB Fellows in 1894 (Young 2004: 381). Now under the banner of the United Church, this protestant denomination boasts the greatest number of adherents throughout the Trobriand Islands. In the 1930s the Sacred Heart Catholic mission built a small settlement near the government station of Losuia. Later, a second Catholic mission was established further north, and at present there are twelve Catholic churches organised into two parishes. With the arrival of Christianity, the Trobriand norms of sexual freedom for young people and self-expression through traditional dance were suddenly made perverse. During the colonial period the churches supported government endeavours to change certain behaviours, especially those considered particularly unsanitary or

unsafe—like exhuming dead bodies and wearing the bones of the deceased (Malinowski 1929: 155) and practising extensive warfare (see Malinowski 1920), famously by introducing Trobriand Cricket (Leach and Kildea 1976) as an alternative to warring with neighbouring villages. But, in matters such as mortuary distributions, celebrations of the yam harvest and the subsequent *milamala* period during which dancing and feasting take place, Trobrianders were generally left to carry on with their traditional activities, though certain restraints were encouraged, particularly in the context of church meetings and events (whether for Catholic or United congregations) such as Women's Fellowship gatherings, Easter or Christmas celebrations, or Saints Day activities, as certain measures of 'propriety' are expected by church leaders. While young children may be encouraged to wear traditional dress, different rules apply for those beyond the age of puberty. Young men might still wear their *yobuwa* or *mimiye'o* (a plant-derived wrap to cover the genitals) and a red cloth wrapped around their waist, but young women will be expected to modestly cover their breasts, and married women will wear long, shapeless t-shirts or *meri* blouses² and long fabric skirts (Fig. 2). In the context of church meetings, the sexuality of participants in dances must be contained. In general, as Eves (1996: 93) points out, dancing in the Pacific was a particular target of intervention for many missionaries (he discusses Methodists, in particular). He argues that bodily movement, particularly emphasised in dance, 'came to be equated with a highly sexualized, disorderly and unruly body that was immoral, lacking character, and in need of transformation'. This resonates with Reed's (1998: 509) general observations that 'dances of the colonized were often appropriated and refigured as adjuncts to the civilizing mission, variously reinforcing stereotypes of mystical spirituality and excessive sexuality'.



Figure 2 Yalumwa village Catholic Women's Fellowship performs outside the church. Photo by author.

The Catholic Church leadership is largely non-indigenous. Each of the missions, at Gusaweta and Wapipi, are home to a priest (at the time of writing, one is from Columbia, the other from the Philippines) and two to four nuns, who might be Italian, Brazilian, Cameroonian, or, rarely, from another region of PNG (but nonetheless a 'foreigner'). Only at the level of lay preachers, or catechists, do Trobriand Islanders serve in the Catholic hierarchy. The United church leadership, on the other hand, tends to be local. The vast majority of pastors, as well as the Convener of the United Church congregations throughout the Islands, are all Trobriand Islanders. Most recently arrived, and also indigenously 'planted' and overseen, are various Pentecostal or Pentecostal-like denominations, beginning with the establishment of a Christian Revival Church (CRC) in the village of Kwebwaga in the late 1980s. Within a few years, a second CRC church was established in the southern Kiriwina village of Sina-keta. Today, Pentecostal churches are scattered throughout the island and include not only the CRC but also Rhema, Four Square, Assembly of God and Word of Life Ministries. While guest preachers may be from Australia or the USA, these churches were brought to the Trobriand Islands by island residents themselves, exposed to the new forms of evangelical Christianity while spending time in urban centres like Port Moresby. Pastors, all of whom are indigenous, rely on their own charisma to establish and lead congregations, with new breakaway churches regularly established, and many find ways of pursuing Bible training programs in various parts of the country.

While only a relatively small number of Trobriand Islanders have joined Pentecostal congregations, and there is much fluidity of movement back to the longer-established churches, the number of congregants belies the influence of the Pentecostal message and style of worship. While missions and Christianity have a long history in PNG, the arrival of Pentecostal and Pentecostal-like churches in the country have resulted in a renewed Christian fervour and the implications of a 'Revived' Christianity have variably been represented in changing beliefs and practices in 'mainline' United Churches as well, not only in the Trobriands but in PNG as a whole; that is to say, the United church has become increasingly Pentecostalized (Van Heekeren 2014: 5; see also both Eriksen and Eves, this volume and compare Freeman 2012: 11 for similar processes in Africa and Gooren 2010 for Latin America). Defining and distinguishing between terms like Pentecostal, evangelical, Revival, and so on can be difficult; theological definitions often do not suffice, nor do self-identifications provide consistent and unified agreement on what these terms connote. Here, I take up Trobrianders' own preference for the term Revival to refer to a recently arrived form of worship, generally associated with Pentecostal or Pentecostal-like churches, which insist on a deeper and literal understanding of the Bible and the immediacy of the Holy Spirit.

In the Trobriand context, the movement towards a Revival form of Christianity has resulted in a more fervent and embodied religious experience than was practiced before the introduction of Pentecostal forms of worship. Perhaps paradoxically, this indigenously propelled movement towards more fundamentalist forms of Christianity (as opposed to largely foreign-imposed Catholic doctrines) has instigated a locally originated re-evaluation of the morality of many cultural practices. Instead of dressing

in the alluring costumes of traditional dancers and performing songs some consider sinful, Revival Christian women wear calico skirts and *meri* blouses or long, loose white t-shirts, while men wear long pants, button-up shirts, and shoes (if they can access them) and sing a well-known set of religious songs, often with actions such as clapping, jumping, waving the hands, and so on (see e.g. Webb 2011) (Fig. 3). Women, in particular, seem to relish these opportunities for embodied worship and often show up with their children well in advance of the Sunday service to participate in the ‘sing along’, a period of song and music preceding the arrival of the pastor and usually lead by youth leaders. Prayers in Revival churches and fellowship meetings are collective and cacophonous, with adherents simultaneously articulating their prayers, in contrast to the silent prayers of parishioners and lone voice of the priest or lay preacher in Catholic services. Crusades, in which pastors use sound systems and electric instruments like keyboards and guitars as well as drum kits to accentuate their messages and to encourage participants to become born again, are common. These often carry on for several consecutive evenings, attracting large crowds. When I attended one of these events in August 2013, a number of individuals heeded the ‘alter call’ (in which a pastor urges those present who have not yet given their lives to Jesus to publicly do so) and went forward to receive the Holy Spirit through the hands of the pastor. They then fell to the ground as the Holy Spirit overtook them. In such contexts, there is no place for ‘tradition’, especially such morally suspect activities as Trobriand Dance.

While the United Churches in the Trobriand Islands now generally practice a similar Revival Christianity to the various Pentecostal denominations, the Catholic Church remains set apart, both in its resistance to a more collective and embodied



Figure 3 'Revived' United Church service, Obwelia Village. Photo by author.

church practice, and its continued embrace of many aspects of Trobriand cultural expression. For example, Father Homero, current priest of the Waipipi Mission in the northern Kiriwina circuit, stresses similarities in Trobriand and Christian beliefs, takes part in traditional mortuary exchanges, and encourages young people to engage in dancing in full traditional dress—though the Catholic church stands with all other churches in the Trobriands in condemning the public performance of *mweki*. This is not to suggest that the Catholic church is more ‘progressive’, or better reflects Trobriand sensibilities, but simply that the Catholic church leadership generally works with the assumption that incorporating and Christianising indigenous practices is the most likely way to win (and keep) adherents (see e.g. Hemer 2011: 65), while Revived Christians are more likely to advocate breaking with so called ‘traditional’ activities altogether.

GENDERED MORALITY AND FEMININE CONTAINMENT

The body and public performances that display them are, as the foregoing discussion has tried to demonstrate, key sites for understanding ideas about morality and gender relations. We can understand the body, for analytical purposes, as having several dimensions or levels of experience: the individual body as the domain of personal embodied experiences and thus phenomenological analyses; the social body, which addresses the ways the body and its products (blood, milk, semen) are symbolic and represent social relationships like gender, kinship, and production; and the body politic, wherein power and control are embodied (Van Wolputte 2004: 254). In this last sense, the body can become a tool of domestication, discipline, subjection, or resistance. Trobriand dance performances encompass all of these levels, each of which is informative of ideas about gendered morality and performers’ positions regarding ongoing local debates that pit ‘tradition’ against Christianity—but which in fact, I argue, are far less distant from one another with respect to dancing than most church officials, foreign observers, and local participants allow.

Whilst many Trobrianders greatly enjoy the ribald performances of Tapioca Dance, and recognise the appeal of this dance to visiting public servants and tourists, others feel ashamed at such brazen public displays of sexuality and the reputation it perpetuates. Moreover, while men are provided a certain licence to perform *mweki* at public events, women are very much discouraged from doing so. As Reed (1998: 517) observes, ‘Prohibitions on and regulation of dance practices are often accurate indices of prevailing sexual moralities linked to the regulation of women’s bodies’. As an example, Reed cites Wagner’s (1997) historical account of a long-standing opposition to dance in the USA since the seventeenth century, primarily propagated by male Protestant clergy and evangelists based on a fear of women and their bodies. A recent controversy in my own ethnographic setting exemplifies the double-standards at play, which I argue are in contrast to Trobriand conceptions of sexuality which are *not* explicitly gendered, while Christian discourses like Pastor Patrick’s cast women as wanton Eves who must be restrained from tempting inherently good men to sin.

In March 2010, I found myself in the concrete and corrugated iron structure that serves as the Catholic Church in Yalumgwa village on the island of Kiriwina. I was in attendance for a meeting of the PPC—the Parish Pastoral Council—where community members (but not the then-priest, a Filipino, nor any of the foreign nuns) had gathered to express their concerns about ‘bad parts’ of Trobriand culture (see also MacCarthy 2013). Specifically, they were upset about several sexually provocative dance performances at a Cultural Show, held the previous November. Outraged community members had written letters or verbalised their objections to the PPC in protest, urging church leaders to take measures to stop such presentation of implicitly or explicitly erotic dance performance. Several participants made direct or indirect references to Biblical teachings about the body, such as Corinthians 6: 19–20: ‘... do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you ... So glorify God in your body’ (English Standard Version). William, the Chairman of the PPC, spoke about the need to preserve ‘family life’ *vis à vis* the preservation of culture. In the performance in question, two particular villages had outraged church members by ‘putting extra’, as Trobrianders often say, into their performance, making exaggerated thrusting gestures and lifting their skirts to the public. The women in the group were much more severely condemned than their male counterparts. The concern was not just about the performance itself, but also for the scandalous behaviours that followed, which were interpreted by my informants as proof that the temptations created through the public performance of women’s sexuality lead directly to sinful action. In this case, some of those dancers who had participated in the particularly licentious Cultural Show performance then went on to perform at fundraisers in urban centres on the mainland, where they became embroiled in extra-marital liaisons. When they returned to the village, the affairs continued, causing considerable strife within their families and communities.

What is more, a performance of Grade 5 schoolchildren before the Bishop of the regional Catholic diocese included a performance of *mweki*, which outraged the Bishop and ‘caused headaches’, my Trobriand interlocutors told me, for the parish. In discussing the incident with me, the then-Bishop (perhaps unintentionally) expressed an all-too-familiar ‘blame the victim’ approach to sexual violence when he told me about a teacher in the Catholic primary school who was accused of molesting a female student. While not exactly condoning the teacher’s actions, the Bishop seemed to feel that the teacher’s defence—‘how long can I resist?’ had some merit, in the face of the sexually provocative nature of scantily-clad adolescent girls performing lewd dances. The morality of the young girls was in danger, and they would be responsible for any moral failings on the part of men.

The letter prepared by church members in response to these incidents advocated ‘more controlled and better supervised’ cultural presentations, but not a ‘ban on culture’. Both church leaders and laypeople are quick to point out that it is not that Trobriand dance *itself* is sinful or ‘bad’, but that these untraditional, even un-Trobriand performances of Tapioca Dance are dangerous because of the *action* they are likely to

evoke. But then, as one of the Catholic nuns pointed out, ‘if 10 minutes of song gives you K200,³ what will you do?’

Despite the temptation of the tourist dollar, the trend is towards using shame and immorality—both in terms of inherently Trobriand, and Christian, values—to discourage public performances that are overtly sexual. Women have internalised such messages. Nuratu, a devout member of the Four Square church, told me that she does not wish to dance in traditional Trobriand garb as it makes her feel ‘shy’ (*agumwasila* = ‘my shame’), and because it encourages lust, adultery, and promiscuity. ‘I want to forget these things’, she told me. But men are not exempt from the dangers inherent in sexualised public performance. For example, one of the pastors who condemns what he calls ‘shameful lyrics’ in the songs accompanying some performances of *mweki*, recently instructed his own congregation to replace the usual bawdy exclamations with shouts of Hallelujah! and Amen! in a performance (by men) of a Trobriand cricket match for a group of visiting Belgian tourists. And when these tourists expressed their wish to commission a performance of Tapioca Dance, they were told that people are now too ‘shy’ or ‘ashamed’ (*kasimwasila*) to do this dance in public. Some young boys and girls were summoned to the more private setting of the guest lodge (in contrast to the outdoor village sports field where the afternoon performances took place) after dinner to perform. The dance as executed was very tame and hardly qualified as Tapioca Dance. The guests were underwhelmed, expecting a lascivious display. Camillus, their local guide, explained that people ‘felt shy because of their religious faith, and because of the lights and all the people who could see them, but if it was just the young people under the moonlight . . .’ it would be another story. This suggests that in making sexuality public, quite a different set of moral rules are invoked than those that guide sexuality outside the public gaze. Though it would take place ‘inside’, the performance of sexuality in such a performance was not seen as contained, since there would be a large audience and artificial lights to illuminate the salacious actions. This was the first time I had seen a refusal to perform Tapioca Dance for tourists.

In her paper in this volume, Annelin Eriksen has argued that femininity, in the context of Pentecostalism (and indeed, other forms of Christianity as well), becomes interiorised. The body, in a context of Christian ideology and practice, which places a greater emphasis on individuality than does the relational sociality of a society in which gifting is the primary form of exchange, takes on new connotations. The body becomes the space within which femininity should be contained. It becomes less something one demonstrates in an embodied way, and rather something to be confined, hidden, and ideally invisible. In precolonial, pre-Christian times, aspects (corporeal, material, cosmological) of women’s femininity were, indeed, much more visible. Beginning with the colonial era, but with an extra push from new Revival Christian movements, many of the practises which once celebrated and physically marked women’s reproductive capacities are now downplayed (see also Barker and Hermkens, this volume, and Hermkens 2013: 55–56 for similar developments regarding female tattooing among the Maisin). This is not only in terms of the covering up

of the skin, and the 'shame' often now associated with traditional dress, including the exposure of women's breasts,⁴ and the sensual or even erotic bodily movements of dance. Indeed, in daily life, that is, beyond the celebratory, seasonal (or, today, tourism-related) dancing events, there are many more examples of how femininity—as publically demonstrating women's sexual availability and/or fecundity—has been restrained and contained in the conversion to Christianity.

Among these are the rituals associated with pregnancy. Malinowski, though criticised by Weiner for paying too little attention to women, documented the elaborate ceremonial attending pregnancy and childbirth for a first-time mother. A woman's female relatives made her several special cloaks, one to be worn in about the fifth month of pregnancy, once her belly had begun to swell; and a second to be donned when the new mother emerged from isolation after giving birth (Malinowski 1929: 212). The focus of these ceremonies included the public incantation of magic spells, the public bathing of the pregnant woman, and her display on a platform for as much as five days, 'depending on the rank and importance of the woman' (Malinowski 1929: 222). While pregnancy also required a period of invisibility, in the form of the woman's confinement to her parents' house for several months, these rituals served to make reproduction visible, celebrated, and public. The woman's confinement was a time for her to concentrate on the health and welfare of her baby, and to scrub herself and stay out of the sun so that her skin would become whitened. When she emerges from the house with her new child, some months after giving birth, she will be judged as a new mother not only by the size and vigour of her child, but also on the whiteness of her skin, which is seen as a marker of her care for the baby's wellbeing. When the new mother emerged from confinement, she would make the rounds throughout the village receiving small gifts of food (Malinowski 1929: 233). Today, these rituals are either not performed at all, or only in a rather cursory way. If any of these observances are upheld, it is the woman's confinement immediately prior to and following childbirth, while the rituals that make the expectant and new mother visible and public have all but disappeared.

Widows, too, previously had onerous and public roles to play. Widows shaved their heads, dressed in black, blackened their skin with soot, and carried constantly remnants and reminders of their deceased husband. Women, to a far greater extent than men, bore these duties 'under the vigilant eyes of the public... and under the more suspicious surveillance of the dead man's kindred' (Malinowski 1929: 148). While again, the widow also faced an obligatory confinement, this in some respects served to make her *more* visible, as she was under the unrelenting surveillance of her husband's relatives. Her release was publically marked, as the widow would be washed and anointed by the female relatives of her deceased spouse, where after she was dressed in a 'gaudy' polychromatic skirt, and once again made marriageable (Malinowski 1929: 158).⁵ Again, such visible markers of women's status as reproductive (the pregnant women) or unproductive (the widow, until she is publically re-identified as reproductive again by being washed and dressed in her bright new skirt) have been largely eradicated in a long process beginning with the admonitions of colonial

officers and early missionaries, and further suppressed by more recent Revivalist movements.

What is more, the active and productive role women played in symbolically reproducing the matrilineage after a death through the manufacture and distribution of the banana leaf textiles collectively called *doba*, and as described by Annette Weiner and others (Weiner 1974, 1976; Weiner 1980; Jolly 1992; Bashkow 2011), has come under recent attack. While the practice did not diminish in the early colonial/mission era, and indeed may have even increased in scale and visibility, recent pushes to become more productive, more modern, and more steadfast in faith have meant that recently, in several villages which practice a revived form of Christianity, women have ceased producing their own 'wealth'. Rather than producing the banana leaf bundles that were once, and in many villages are still, given away in the thousands as a form of payment for services rendered to the deceased when he or she was ill, or in the aftermath of the death, in some villages these bundles have been replaced by Chinese-made calico cloth, store goods such as cooking pots and cutlery, and kina notes—things deemed more 'useful' in the prosperity-rhetoric of the Revival churches. In other cases, the distributions themselves have been significantly reduced in size and scale. Elsewhere, I examine the implications of these changes in women's roles as producers, by exploring the relationship between various churches and changing exchange practices (MacCarthy n.d.). I look at the relationship between values (in the moral or ethical sense) and value (in the economic sense) to tease out this relationship, and how it plays out in terms of both discourses and practices.

CONCLUSION

In sum, I have here looked to discourses on the morality of dance performances to reflect on 'the broader landscape of cultural continuity and social change, and the tensions between tradition and modernity, customary beliefs and Christianity' (Lepani 2012: 163). In particular, I have demonstrated some ways in which dance performances are a locus of contestation about the display of a feminine sexuality that both 'traditional' Trobrianders and evangelical Christian ones would deem best 'contained', though with different moral logics. I do not assume a direct opposition between Christianity and pre-Christian Trobriand notions of morality, but rather, I interrogate through sustained ethnographic inquiry of Trobrianders' own moral dilemmas as they express them. While in fact, indigenous and Christian moralities are in agreement that sexuality should be private, not performed publically, the Church's notion of morality, especially in the case of Revival forms of Christianity, makes an explicit distinction between appropriate behaviour for men and women, promoting a double standard which is not evident in 'traditional' sexuality. In many of these discourses, the emphasis is placed on difference, with women characterised as morally threatening. Dance performances, a core cultural expression of Trobriand identity and values, provide a window through which to examine contested notions of morality and emphases on gender difference that emerge from a range of

Christian discourses, and a reflexive response to the anthropological and popular representations of the 'Islands of Love'.

In Trobriand gender relations, women and men are constituted as gendered, heterosexual subjects through their kinship relations, which form the very core of relationality and identity. Performances of dance, whether of *mweki* for a group of visiting tourists, or of religious songs at a Women's Fellowship meeting, are public statements of one's identity, not just as an individual, but as a member of a given set of relations—marital, clan, sub-clan, and so on. When churches speak out against the performances of Tapioca Dance and other traditional dances, they do so as a means of imposing another version of heterosexual and kinship norms, underpinned by a different moral logic.

If Robbins' (2004) description of the Urapmin disjuncture between pre-and post-conversion represents the extreme case of entirely reconceived ideas of social personhood emerging from the adoption of Christianity, the Trobriands represents perhaps the opposite end of the spectrum. Though fully suffused into daily life, and at least nominally practised and accepted by virtually all members of the community, Christianity has, for more than one hundred years, co-existed with beliefs, rituals, and activities 'from the ancestors', with biblical and indigenous stories and beliefs intermingled in all aspects of quotidian life. Cultural expressions like Tapioca Dance, developed within the context of Christianity and, within that moral universe, is held up as an example of the antithesis of 'good', virtuous Christian behaviour (and, anyway, not *really* traditional dance), demonstrate the complexity of the tradition-vs-Christianity relationship and the fact that this is not always an easy syncretism. New forms of indigenous-led Revival forms of Christian practice and belief challenge pre-existing relationships between cultural activities such as dance performances (and their variable relationships to a pre-missionisation link with the ancestors) and religious activities such as church services, outreach programs and fellowship that are today the focus of much of community life. In this context, where plural Christianities meet plural ideas of what constitutes 'tradition', gendered ideals of morality continue to be negotiated, contested, and debated by a community in which standards of morality and 'right' or 'good' gendered behaviour have multiple frames of reference that often cannot easily be reconciled.

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NOTES

- 1 *Tabu* in the Trobriands means ‘ancestor’, grandparent, or particular kinspersons on one’s father’s side (Malinowski 1935 v.2: 113; Weiner 1976: 38–39; Senft 1986: 376) but it is also sometimes used, perhaps due to missionary influence (Malinowski 1935 v.2: 113), in the sense of ‘forbidden’ or ‘sacred’. It is therefore not necessarily synonymous with the word taboo, but sometimes carries the same connotations.
- 2 *Meri* is Tok Pisin (PNG pidgin) for woman or wife (derived from Mary, the Biblical mother of Jesus, and suggesting the purity and devotion that Mary is seen to represent). These long, loose calico tops are ubiquitous throughout PNG as appropriate and respectable women’s wear for both formal and informal occasions. They were introduced and promoted by early missionaries of the London Missionary Society (LMS) and the Lutheran Mission.
- 3 K refers to PNG Kina (PGK), the state issued currency of PNG. At the time of writing, 200 PGK is about 80 USD.
- 4 The fetishisation of women’s breasts deserves a note of clarification. In ‘traditional’ Trobriand life, i.e. when not referring to Christian or Biblical teachings, women’s breasts fell into two categories: those of young, unmarried women who had not yet borne children, which are a key factor in determining a young woman’s beauty and desirability, and which are on display to the delight of young men in traditional dance; and the breasts of mothers, which have been transformed from objects of desire to the vessels from which the essence of the matriline itself is passed to the child. Only with Christianity and an imposed normativity of modesty and chastity do breasts become something that should be hidden from public view, though in the villages, it is still very common to see the exposed breasts of mothers.
- 5 While there were some ceremonials and proscriptions for widowed men, these were far less onerous and public.

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