

6 Of Magic and Meaningfulness: Chelitákl Rechuódel and the Felt- bodily Dimensions of Spiritual Practice

Abstract

This chapter explores musical ólai (magic) practices. The practice of magic in traditional Palau required for spells not only to be recited but to resound as chelitákl rechuódel, traditional chant repertoire. The reason for that is that the magic could be implemented only through the repertoire's capacity to link, via the felt body, the present moment experientially with Palauan 'deep time'. This shows to what extent the meaningfulness of chelitákl rechuódel resides in music's capacity to connect the categories of time, space and sociality into a whole; that whole will then emerge as a deep sense of Palauanness. Chelitákl rechuódel make Palauanness felt in an encompassing sense. This is how "music worlds".

Keywords: ólai, magic, music worlding, Palauanness

[K]e rekós bedagalára ngerém ë Mulbekl
meskók tial bedógël loloódo ra dáob
mak meloódo kur tial dáob ra gëlagá lë gëós
ë Sagageiegá me ke bedógël
a dalál a rul, a dalál a rā'i
a dalám, a dalám, a dalám

You fulfil your command, Mulbekl,
give this fulfilment to beckon down the sea,
and now I beckon down this sea today.
Sagageiegang [Sachacheiechang], you fulfil it;
the mother of the ray, the mother of the flatfish,

your mother, your mother, your mother.

(KETC 2017b, 214; also see Krämer 1929a, 291-2)

There is no extant recording of this chant to beckon down the sea which Augustin Krämer recorded in 1909-10. But from the poetic and rhythmic structure of the words, it is highly likely that this chant was supposed to be performed as a *kesekés*. Kesekés are of an open musical form that will easily accommodate any number of poetic lines without necessarily dividing them into stanzas. Usually performed in relaxed voice, their overall tone is calm, unfolding through melodic movement within a small ambitus. Regarding their soothing effect, they are often used as lullabies, and many Palauan today will translate the word *kesekés* as such. In worldly *kesekés* singing, the chant's inner tempo will be slower in the beginning and faster toward the end of the chant; meanwhile, the outer tempo remains generally consistent. A *kesekés* displays a slight intensification of rhythmic density across its unfolding, which emerges as a dramatic arc holding together the otherwise serene chant. The lyrics of [K]e rekós bedagalára ngerëm ë Mulbekl mirror this nicely: the concluding lines a dalál a rul, a dalál a ra'i / a dalám, a dalám, a dalám reflect and reinforce the inner-rhythmic densification of the musical final phrase by way of rhythmic word repetition.

[K]e rekós bedagalára ngerëm ë Mulbekl is a magical chant. As the lyrics suggest, it serves to calm down the ocean, which may be necessary, for instance, in the case of the beginning of a tsunami. The magical ability to prevent a tsunami from putting the islands at risk continues to be passed on along hereditary lines in contemporary Palau. The lyrics are instructive vis-à-vis the general structure of a magical chant: the chanter will appeal to a deity, usually an *chelid*: "You fulfil your command, Mulbekl." They will then explain what their magic will be about and enlist the deity's help: "give this fulfilment to beckon down the sea", before they put the deity's "fulfilment" to work by uttering that they will now do so: "and now I beckon down this sea today". As most magical chants do, the chant continued by evoking Sachacheiechang's support of the spell: "Sagageiegang [Sachacheiechang], you fulfil it." Sachacheiechang is an *chelid* from Peliliu (Krämer 1929a, 47), who, together with his sister Dilkedch (Krämer's spelling: Dile dëgú), is considered to be the inventor of magic. Together, the two of them are also currently the deities that will be called upon in situations where general advice on magic is needed. Sachacheiechang had invented a spell to wake the dead (Krämer 1929a, 283-4), which was taken to be the ultimate magical act and imbued Sachacheiechang with absolute magical authority. This is why most chants will evoke him explicitly to fulfil their magic by including

the standard phrase Krämer recorded as “*ë Sagageiegá me ke bedógël*.” “*Sachacheiechang*, you fulfil it.” *Dilkedch* is, among many other things, the mother of a number of fish. The next line, “the mother of the ray, the mother of the flatfish”, evokes her as the mother and, thus, authority figure over fish, which, owing to their flatness, can help calm down the sea. The final line, “your mother, your mother, your mother”, addresses those fish directly. In this way, the line ensures the *olái*, magic, establishes a direct link with the forces of the natural world – which is as much a part of *Sachacheiechang* and *Dilkedch*’s world as it belongs to the physical surroundings of the chanter.

[K]e rekós bedagalára ngerém *ë Mulbekl* is one of many magical chants Augustin Krämer and his crew recorded during the Hamburg South Seas Mission (1908-1910), unfortunately only in writing. They range from spells waking the dead, counter-magic against malevolent spells, love magic, spells aiming to improve a person’s public standing, defences against spell work, charms to invoke bodily strength or cure ailments, magic to beckon down the sea (see the chant above) to vegetable planting magic aiming to increase the crop. His reports and earlier accounts (Kubary 1873, 1885a, 1885b, 1888, 1969; Semper 1873) are full of descriptions of the deeply spiritual nature of Palauan oral history. Palauans are descendants of the Gods, their villages are the seat of Gods, and visible markers of divine presence on the islands, such as stones, extend their presence into the present. I have used the distinction between presence as an asignifying intensity and neo-phenomenological ideas of the present in Chapter 4 to inquire into the temporal axis of musical meaningfulness in its entanglement with Palauan ‘deep time’. To account for the spiritual dimension of the depth of Palauan time, however, requires an exploration that goes beyond the narrative and the textual. Such an exploration needs to address the felt-bodily dimension of Palauan traditional spirituality vis-à-vis both Palauan ‘deep time’ as the central framework of musical meaningfulness, on the one hand, and sound-based cultural practices rendering musical meaningfulness intensely experiential, on the other. This is what this chapter sets out to do. It offers a source-based exploration of traditional Palauan magic, which will reveal how the sounding of the recitative voice is the agentive force awakening the latent divinity of *chelitákl rechuódel*.

Magic | Olái

“Magic” is a notorious term in the history of scholarly writing about the Pacific, with a long history of abuse at the hands of Euro-American

ethnography. Early anthropologists tended to conflate ritual and magical practices all together, and the rise of the evolutionary paradigm in early twentieth-century Europe reinforced extant ideas about the linkage between “magic” and “primitivity” in the social-evolutionary sense (see Kaeppler et al. 1998). At the same time, magic is arguably also one of the most researched aspects of Oceanic ethnography. Bronislaw Malinowski, against the backdrop of his rich and detailed work on magic among the Trobriand in New Guinea, famously described Oceanic magic as

a specific power, essentially human, autonomous and independent in its action. This power is an inherent property of certain words, uttered with the performance of certain actions by the man entitled to do it through his social traditions and through certain observances he has to keep. The words and acts have this power in their own right, and their action is direct and not mediated by any other agency. (Malinowski 1922, 427)

Fortune, when working in Manus Province, Papua New Guinea, described local magic as something that needed to be “recited aloud. It cannot be stolen by another. Its power is dependent on its having been rightfully obtained in marriage exchanges, peace-making exchanges or by more outright payment” (Fortune 1935, 121; also quoted in Kaeppler et al. 1998, 186). Malinowski and Fortune describe the common ground of most magical traditions of the Western Pacific Island world: They are speech acts and, as such, performance-bound; their enactment requires the co-performance of prescribed accompanying actions (such as gestures); they are personal property and the right to specific magical acts is exclusive but often exchange- or saleable; the magical power resides in its structural make-up, which is why they cannot be mediated.

Most of Palauan traditional magic by far requires sonic enactment to work its power. Based on evidential reports, while it was technically acceptable to do so, it rarely happened for spells to be spoken, not chanted. Chelitákl rechuódel were the primary medium for acts of magic, specifically kesekés, chesóls and omengeredákl. Its potential to work magic lies in chelitákl rechuódel’s rootedness in the realm of the divine and it is disclosed to humans mostly through visions and dreams. Chelitákl rechuódel are inventions of the chelíds, and they are olángch. However, unlike olángch objects, such as stone formations belonging to the earliest creation myths, chelitákl rechuódel do not only serve as correlational gestures whose

referentiality outstrips the intensity of the suggestions of motion they exude. The latent divinity of *chelitákl rechuódel* is in deep slumber until musically enacted through performance. Once the sound of the reciting voice, a vibrational energy travelling through space and enveloping the felt bodies contained in that space, resounds, it affects those present across the whole range of their sensory apparatus. Eisenlohr emphasises how as the sonic, those “traveling energetic and vibratory phenomena that include, but also go far beyond what can be heard and potentially be sensed by the entire body” (2019). The auditory, to him, is one element of the sensory complex of lived religious experience. The sonic, however, “lies in close proximity to the holistic *Gestalten*, the atmospheric core of the sensory spectacle of religion” (Eisenlohr 2019). This core of the spectacle of religion, churning with suggested motion as I would add, “cannot be reduced to single sensory impressions, but emerges prior to the singling out of such impressions” (Eisenlohr 2019), be they olfactorily, visual, auditory or something else. This is where he locates the power of publicly enacted religion: in the “seemingly ineffable holism” that resembles what Schmitz refers to as *synaesthesia*, a transcendence of separate sensory perceptive registers in favour of a “holistic character of atmospheric perception that is upstream from the singling out of particular sensory impressions” (Eisenlohr 2019). The holistic core of the lived spiritual experience, that is to say, interact atmospherically with felt bodies, pervading them as sonic suggestions of motion and reverberating in their material body at the same time. In the context of the enactment of magic through *chelitákl rechuódel*, the holistic core of the lived spiritual experience is a *klebelau-laden* sense of the interlacing of Palauan ‘deep time’ *temporo-spatiality* with the islands’ mythology both as a narration and a cultural practice that weaves the practitioners deeply into the emerging relational construct. It takes *chelitákl rechuódel* to make this holistic core resound, in the flesh and beyond, to render it experiential. Once rendered experientially, all boundaries between the magic and people involved in it, between the mythological past and the experience of the present moment, between a chant and its mysterious magical efficacy have been torn down. As the sonic suggestions of motion exuding from divine *chelitákl rechuódel* repertoire being enacted vibrate through space and envelop everyone and everything in it, they connect everyone and everything. That sonic sensation of connectedness is awash with a meaningfulness that is distinctly and exclusively Palauan. Through it, Palau comes about anew, magically. This, too, is how *chelitákl rechuódel* music-worlds.

Present-day Magic

Magic in present-day Palau generally continues to be engrained in the daily life of a part of society. However, as in other parts of the Oceanic world, “the relationship between magic and modernity has been an uncomfortable one [...] Seen as an antithesis of modernity, magic was ‘a production of illusion and delusion that was thought to recede and disappear as rationalization and secularization spread throughout society’ (Pels 2003, 4)” (Eves 2010). Before the arrival of the Christian mission in the late nineteenth century, magical practices were an integral element of the traditional Palauan belief system. Palauans generally distinguished between two types of supernatural entities: gods and ancestral spirits. The latter comprised the *bládek*, consisting of all ancestral spirits of one’s own genealogy, and *deléb*, all other spirits. *Bládek* were generally well-meaning and helpful, even though they were easily annoyed; *deléb* were potentially harmful. This division of the spirit world mirrors the social division of Palau into (often adversary) clans. The family’s title holder and head of clan acted as the intermediary between the *bládek* and the family, making regular offerings and summoning the *bládek* for general communication or specific advice. This meant that each clan had a deity assigned to them via the creation myth as well as family-specific *bládek*. *Chelíds* (gods) were more powerful than *bládek* (see Barnett 1949, 79–80), but with the exception of the highest *chelíds*, who were not assigned to specific clans, they were part of a divine hierarchy that mirrored the hierarchy of Palauan clans. Clans also had clan-specific food restrictions preventing them from ingesting, and sometimes even making eye contact with, specific animals or plants. (Barnett 1949, 79–80)

The general Palauan word for magic is *olái*. A malevolent spell cast onto a person or thing is a *temáll*, which also simply means “damage” and “destruction,” and malevolent magic cast on to food, including betel nuts, is *tebál*. Love magic is referred to as *ollák*, and *oeullák* means “to capture by means of love magic”. Malevolent magic aimed at causing death or misfortune to someone is called *okodúis*, which is related to *melúis*, “to remove something filthy”. *Mengelil/manglíl* is a container term for foretelling and other divinatory practices (also see Aoyagi 2002, 40–7), usually divination based on phenomena in the natural world, such as clouds, fish movement, spider webs or betel nuts (Kubary 1888, 40). *Melechólb* refers generically to benevolent magic, but in a narrower sense, refers to a bathing ritual aimed at getting rid of evil spirits. The word itself also means “to bathe”, “to baptise” and, referring to plants,

“to shed leaves”. Finally, magic to make oneself seem “inconspicuous” is called *orreuádes* (see also Josephs 1990). Magical practices involve spell recitation, for which a variety of *chelitákl rechuódel* genres is suitable: *chesóls*, *kesekés* and *omengeredákl*. In rare cases, spells can also simply be spoken. Some recitations have to be accompanied by gestures. In the case of the magic spell quoted at the beginning of this chapter, which Krämer recorded as a *goloódo ra dáob* (“beckoning down of the sea”, see KETC 2017b, 214-5; Krämer 1929a, 291), this is a downward motion of the hands inviting the sea to calm down. Healing magic may involve suitable plants, often *sis* (ti plant); *sis* was also used in *gomóket* (the spelling is Krämer’s, see KETC 2017b, 208; Krämer 1929a, 285), spells to wake the dead. Other paraphernalia could be used depending on their metaphoric properties, a practice reminiscent of Frazer’s otherwise reductive and outdated principles of magic, according to which (1) like produces like and effect resembles cause, and (2) objects that have been in contact with one another will continue to impact on each other even when removed from one another (Frazer 1913, 12-4).

Barnett observed in 1948-49 that there was still

a category of religious specialists properly called magicians. For a price, they used their knowledge to cast spells upon the enemies of their clients or employed counter-magic to break the spell of other magicians. Contagious magic seems to have been most popular. With this a magician effected his purpose through the use of some object that had been in intimate association with his victim, such as an article of his clothing, a hair, or, most frequently, his cast-off betel quid. (Barnett 1960, 82)

Barnett’s “magicians” were the *kerong*, spiritual intermediaries whose mediumship would usually first manifest in the combination of some kind of unusual behavior, including seizures to fits, with claims of having been chosen as a medium by a particular *chelíd* (see Barnett 1949, 81; Kubary 1888, 31). *Kerongs* were an *chelíd*’s delegate and would sometimes be possessed by the *chelíd*. Such bodily possession could go hand in hand with some kind of trance, tremor or body trembling. When in a possessed state, the *kerong*’s voice was the *chelíd*’s voice. A *kerong*’s services were available in exchange for payment in the form of, for example, Palauan money, food or betel nuts.

Other magical practices were within hereditary responsibility, such as the ability to beckon down the sea (see the *goloódo ra dáob* chant collected by Krämer and quoted at the beginning of this chapter). Born into a specific position within a family and clan, it was the native’s obligation

to act responsibly concerning their hereditary magic. The person endowed with the ability to magically beckon down the sea or divert a tsunami for instance, was obliged to stay on the islands and not leave for extended periods of time to make sure they were available should their magic be needed. This practice continues to be respected within sections of Palauan society. Traditional crafts and professions naturally included deep knowledge of the trade's proper magical rituals as well, and some of this *ólai* was also well protected property (Kubary 1888, 47). Barnett quotes canoe makers, house builders, midwives and fishermen, whose command of proper incantations was a basic skill (Barnett 1949, 82). Clearly, working magic according to one's social standing and professional capacity was a mainstay of daily life. Augustin Krämer noted how people in Ngardmau, at the time of his research, considered a special type of crab to be *chelids* (KETC 2017b, 95; Krämer 1929a, 130); similar notions prevail, in varying degrees, all over contemporary Palau. Both the ubiquitous presence of magic and the framing of specific animals as divine in nature are cultural enactments of Palauan 'deep time'. They serve to correlate the temporo-spatial with the mythological in order to render the resonances arising between them experiential. In the case of magical practice, this process is mediated through chanting and, quite literally, set in motion through the vibrational energy of chant performance.

Magically Meaningful

Anthropology has long recognised the connectivity between ritual and communication with both the spirit world and spirit possession. The pivotal role of sound has been a main theme throughout this literature. Mircea Eliade, for instance, describes drumming as a means of taking a(ny) "shaman to the 'Center of the World,' or enabl[ing] him to fly through the air, or summon[ing] and 'imprison[ing]' the spirits, or, finally [...] enabl[ing] the shaman to concentrate and regain contact with the spiritual world through which he is preparing to travel" (Eliade 1989 [1964], 168). Music for Eliade is clearly the core shamanic technique of ecstasy. He argues that there is always a musical instrument and that it is always this that will eventually establish contact with the world of the spirits (Eliade 1989 [1964], 179). In a similar vein, Hunter summarises "that in spite of the many different techniques for the induction of contact with the spirit world, music is the most cross-culturally prevalent" (Hunter 2015). It is important here to note, however, that spirit possession is different from shamanistic

practices involving altered states of consciousness. While in shamanism, the shaman will always retain control of their body, spirit possession is based on the surrender of control of the possessed person over their own body to the possessing spirit or deity (Gauld 1982, 29-31). A shaman's role requires their ability to recall their journey, while a medium will have no memory of their possession whatsoever once they regain consciousness. Rouget (1985) and Hunter (2015) conclude that in either case, trance is "not necessarily an automatic response to particular musical forms, but rather is a learned response" (Hunter 2015; also see Becker 1994).

The preceding chapters have laid an emphasis on Palauan 'deep time' in exploring historicity, presentness, the body and resonance as key dimensions for the unfolding of musical meaningfulness, in the sense of a temporo-spatiality based on a correlation of directed movements along a path through times and spaces as a framework for musical meaningfulness in Palau. This temporo-spatial configuration is held together by a substantial body of oral history detailing everything from the creation of the Palauan islands to the emergence of the first humans on the islands, the divine origin of their societal structure and the alignment of both the social make up and cultural practices with planetary constellations and movement. It is important to note that the stories that weave these various strands together into *klebelau* do not do this only by their narrative functioning, even though that is a key element. Magical key phrases including the one recorded by Kramer as "ë Sagageiegá me ke bedógël", "Sagageiegang, you fulfil it", is an example here: A spell will remain ineffective without a direct link to the *chelíd*, without his presence and blessing. Establishing this connection is only possible through the cultural act of chanting. Chanting, here, is more than a speech act. It requires the sounding of *chelitákl rechuódel*, because only the latter are able to truly link the now with spiritual power of Palauan 'deep time'. I argue that this ability to establish the perhaps most essential link of them all is due to the felt-bodily dimension of chanting *chelitákl rechuódel*, which allows for the full-fledged experience, rather than explication, of everything regardless of whether or not it can possibly be expressed in words. Vice versa, the deep meaningfulness Palauans experience in *chelitákl rechuódel* is rooted in precisely this unique affordance of music-making to yield resonances, across every possible sensory register and beyond, that are powerful enough to bind together experiential dimensions and relational networks. By transferring divine magical power into the present experience, *ólai chelitákl rechuódel* not only describe how "it all makes sense"; they show it does.

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Figure 13 Bai ornament in Koror as documented by Augustin Krämer during the Hamburg South Seas Expedition. (Krämer 1929b, double plate 6) Krämer's description: "[T]he land Bigáket, the food land [...], left women dancing, right men, center the sea as divider. The women most clearly show the begel [...] as stimulants." (KETC 2017c, 117)