

The Evolution of Polpolot: Innovation and Continuity in a Baluan Song Form

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Abstract

Recent developments in the *polpolot* song style from Baluan Island (Manus Province, Papua New Guinea) constitute examples of simultaneous innovation and continuity, in both performance format and language usage. Polpolot is one of three traditional two-part vocal forms from Baluan, whose usage has been in gradual decline over the late 20th century, as younger generations have eschewed them for newer, introduced song forms. Whereas the original language of polpolot is an archaic form of the indigenous language, Ngolan Paluai, a body of polpolot that concerns PNG's transition to political independence in 1975 uses Tok Pisin, the official language of the new nation. This fact draws interesting correlative lines between the evolutions in song form and language. At the Balopa Festival in 2006, a local clan chief, Mela Popeu, presented a 12-member polpolot choir. While an innovation, the choir constitutes a clear developmental line from the original polpolot and represents continuity in a way that the introduced song forms do not. Moreover, the language of the choir's repertoire was principally contemporary (as opposed to archaic) Ngolan Paluai, with one song in English. These song texts were concerned with welcoming visitors to Baluan for the Festival. This choice of languages is simultaneously looking inward and outward; the use of contemporary indigenous language is inclusive of the younger generations of Baluan and the use of English looks outward, past broader PNG, to a potentially international audience.

Keywords Baluan, indigenous song, Paluai language, Papua New Guinea, Polpolot

INTRODUCTION

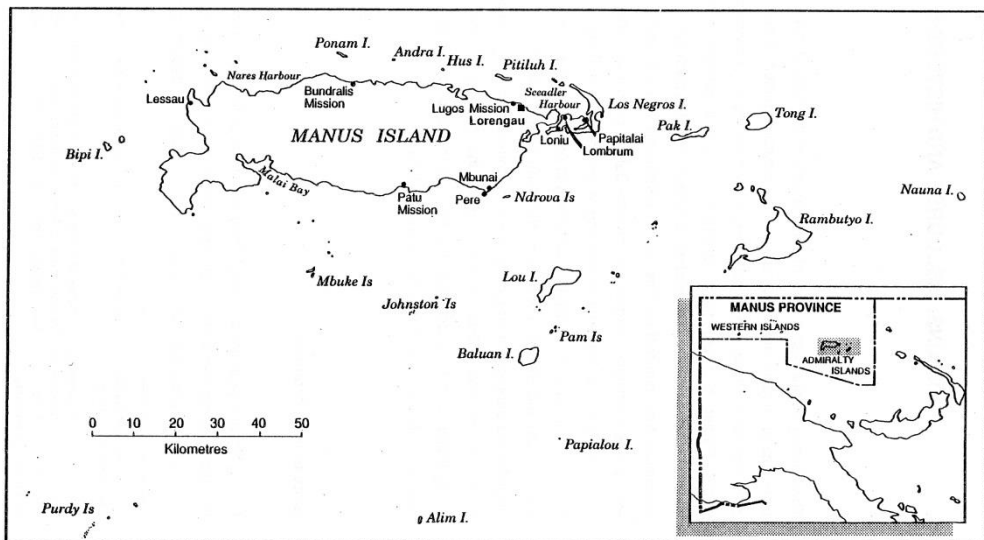
Baluan Island in the Manus Province of Papua New Guinea — known as Paluai to its indigenes — is renowned in the region for the rhythmically complex music of its *garamut* (log idiophone) ensembles (see Lewis 2012, 2014, forthcoming 2017). Baluan is also the home of three particular indigenous song genres: *kolorai*, *woei* and polpolot. Usage of these three indigenous forms has been in decline through the later part of the 20th century, going into the early 21st, as the younger generations turn to introduced song forms — principally *stringben* (stringband) music and to a lesser degree, hymnody (and sometimes hymnody expressed through the medium of stringben).

Recent innovations in Baluan, however, give hope for the survival of polpolot as a relevant contemporary genre. This paper traces developments in these Baluan song forms — focusing particularly on polpolot — through recent decades, and up to recent

developments. Through examination of four different polpolot songs, composed over a 40-year period (from 1966 to 2006) we see changes in both structure and presentation formats. More significantly, we see how the languages in which the songs are sung are changing to reflect the changing times and contexts of the songs, as well as concurrent aspirations of the Baluan community.

BALUAN ISLAND AND ITS SONG FORMS

The island of Baluan lies about 65 kilometres south of the Manus provincial capital Lorengau and is accessible only by boat. To its immediate north-northeast are the islands of Lou and Pam and together, these three islands make up the Local Level Government area of Balopa. These islands can be seen in Map 1 (Baluan is a little below the centre of this map, and Lou and Pam are to the north-northeast of Baluan). The name Balopa is composed of the first two letters of the name of each island — Baluan, Lou, Pam.

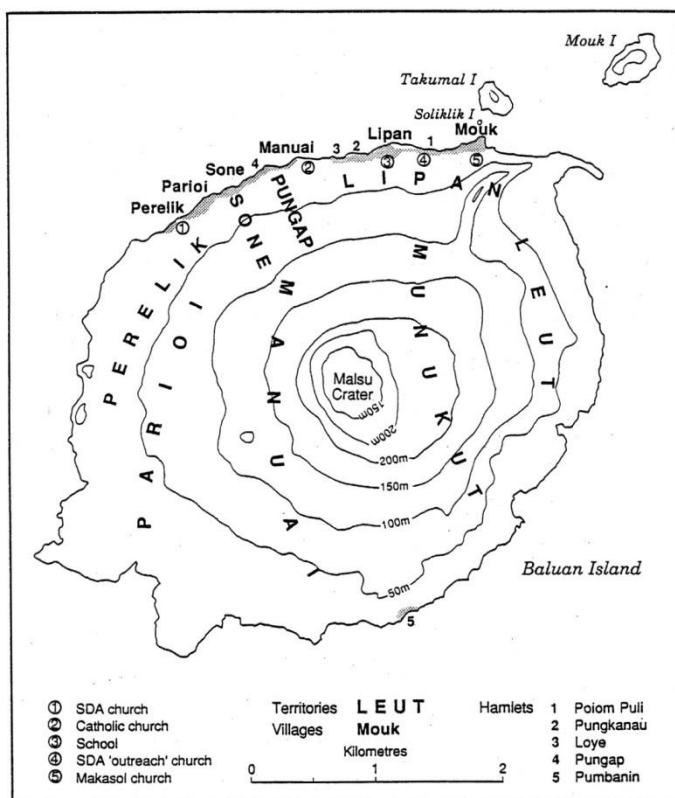


Map 1 Map of Manus Province, showing Baluan, Lou and Pam Islands that make up the Local Level Government area of Balopa (Source: Otto, 1991, p. 12. Map reproduced by permission of the author)

Baluan is a volcanic island protruding from the sea; the majority of the population lives in seven villages, six of which are along the north coast and one on the south coast. Much of the activity addressed in this paper, both historical and contemporary, has taken place in the village of Lipan, which is the largest village in Baluan and the second from the eastern end of the north coast line of villages (see Map 2). Lipan village is also where I stay whenever I visit Baluan.

The population of Baluan is difficult to estimate and historical reports differ significantly. Messner (1981, p. 433) states it as 300 while Otto (1992a, p. 264) estimates it at around 1,000 people. Schokkin (2014, p.10n) concludes that “it is hard to

estimate the number of inhabitants of Baluan Island, since sources are out-dated and the population appears to have grown rapidly in the last decade”. A reasonable estimate for 2016 can be made by comparing the Papua New Guinea national census figures for 2000 and 2011 (National Statistical Office, 2002, pp. 7-8; 2012, p. 30), and projecting consistent and uniform growth. That would put the current population of Baluan at around 1,800.



Map 2 Map of Baluan Island. Lipan village can be seen on the north coast (Source: Otto, 1991, p.46. Map reproduced by permission of the author)

Currently, there are four languages spoken on Baluan. Ngolan Paluai (literally ‘the language of Baluan’) is the primary indigenous language or tok ples of Baluan, and is spoken as the first language by a large majority of the population. Titan is the secondary indigenous language, introduced in 1946, when a group of Titan speakers were given a small area of land on Baluan (Schwartz, 1958, p. 69; 1962, p.262). Both Ngolan Paluai and Titan are of the Austronesian language family; Schokkin (2014, p. 1) confirms that all languages of the Manus Province “belong to the Oceanic subgroup of the Austronesian language family”. Tok Pisin (Melanesian Pidgin English, or Neo-Melanesian) is the *lingua franca* of all Papua New Guinea and some people (mainly the younger generations and some of the more widely-travelled of the older generations) have skills in English as well.

Significantly, Ngolan Paluai has been through its own evolution during the 20th century, and the language that is commonly spoken today differs from the language that is used in the majority of historical polpolot songs. The use in songs of a language that differs from the language of everyday usage is a widespread phenomenon in Papua New Guinea. Niles (2015, p. xl) summarises the breadth of occurrence in this way:

In almost every source that discusses Papua New Guinea song texts, mention is made of the use of poetic language, either in reference to individual words or longer parts of the text. These might be words from specialised or less familiar vocabulary; an archaic version of the present language; another dialect or language (perhaps, thereby, suggesting origin, trade, purchase, or prestige); the language of spirits or ghosts; or newly created words as the result of word taboos. Sometimes such poetic usage can be readily understood, but more often it appears to challenge and entice listeners.

In the case of Baluan, the language of the older polpolots appears to be an archaic version of the present language.¹ Whether this older language was once the commonly spoken language of Baluan, or whether it existed only in song texts, is not something I have been able to establish.

The three indigenous song forms are more or less identical in structure, but differ mainly in distinctions in gender of the performers. Kolorai, woei and polpolot are all two-part genres, being sung either by two men (kolorai), two women (woei), or one man and one woman (polpolot). A typical musical structure, from which there is rarely any variation, consists of a short introductory passage by a single voice, which is then echoed by the second voice following closely behind, before the two voices fall into rhythmic unison. Messner (1998, p. 603) identifies the indigenous terms for these parts respectively as *yaret* (call out) and *isiol* (join). The aural effect of this introductory statement is immediately reminiscent of the *dulugu ganalan*, or ‘lift-up-over-sounding’ that Feld (1988, p. 76) describes in his studies amongst the Kaluli people of the Southern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea. (See also Feld’s sound recordings of the Kaluli—*Bosavi: Rainforest Music from Papua New Guinea* (2001) — and the Smithsonian Folkways web page on the CD set.) This vocal introduction begins (in terms of Western scale structure) approximately a fourth above the closing note. The closing note is what I will refer to herein as the ‘home note’, being the note that is sustained by the lower vocal parts that follows. The introduction is generally sung on vocable syllables that have no textual meaning, such as ‘oi’, ‘or’, ‘oo’ or ‘ee’.

I provide a notated example below (Example 1) of a typical *yaret* sung by Alup Songo Molmole (whom I discuss further below), although I caution the reader against reading too much into this notation. The placement of notes on a five-line treble-clef staff can invite immediate associations to western standards in pitch, temperament and metre, but the singers of Baluan recognise no such standards. Therefore, this notation and all others that follow herein, are approximations only, in order to give the reader a broad sense of what is happening musically. I begin this *yaret* on the note E because that is the closest note in the Western scale to Molmole’s starting note.



Example 1 A typical yaret sung by Alup Songo Molmole (transcribed by Tony Lewis)

Following this introduction, a song usually consists of three stanzas, each sung syllabically and each repeated. The third stanza always begins with sustained vocable ‘e-wo’, which interrupts the otherwise loosely strophic form of the songs. I qualify the term ‘strophic’ in this context because stanzas can vary in metric length according to the text that accompanies them. The sung text, above all, is the determinant of the metric lengths of phrases and stanzas.

The strongest musical characteristic of these genres is the constant pitch movement between unison and seconds (somewhere between the minor and major seconds of the Western temperament) and consequently, the oscillation between consonance and dissonance to the Western-trained listener (see Example 2). One voice holds a constant pitch on the home note while the other voice moves up a second from it and returns back to it. Each stanza opens at the second interval and closes in pitch unison on the home note.



Example 2 The typical movement between unison and seconds, notated from a polpolot sung by Alup Songo Molmole and Ngat Kalou Solok (transcribed by Tony Lewis)

The ‘e-wo’ that opens each third stanza also begins in seconds (‘e’) and moves to unison (‘wo’). Occasional passing passages could be interpreted as heterophonic, but the inconsistency of these leads me to understand them as spontaneous and perhaps unintentional variations, rather than a defining musical characteristic. The total range of the polpolot sung in this style, including the introduction, is a perfect fourth (from B to E in Example 1).

Little of substance has been documented on these genres to date, a notable exception being Messner’s 1981 article, and the same author’s entry in the *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Volume 9* (1998). Messner (1981) identifies a number of early sources, predominantly in German, that mention these song genres, but concludes that these studies “have generally been superficial and faulty and no serious attempt has been made to study this music thoroughly in connection with its sociocultural context” (1981, p. 434). Messner (1981, pp. 435-436) presents the three genres in a hierarchical order (the same order in which I have presented them above):

1. kolorai: epic male ritual songs given high value;
2. weii:
 - a. epic female ritual songs given high value;
 - b. songs for various functions;
 - c. lamentations and mourning songs sung in unison;
 - d. work songs sung by males;

3. polpolot: songs for entertainment without any traditional value. (Today, these songs replace and substitute for all other ritual songs and are sung by men, women and mixed groups.)

I make two notes here on Messner's report. First, I note Messner uses a different spelling of 'weii'; I cannot account for this difference. I can only state that I use the spelling 'woei' that was given to me by my informants in Baluan. Schokkin (2014) spells it 'weyi' (p. 12). As is often the case in unfamiliar languages, the pronunciation of the spoken word does not always accord with established Eurocentric norm and consequently it can sometimes be difficult to find the appropriate letters of the Roman alphabet to represent the spoken sounds. The pronunciation I know is somewhere 'woei' and 'weii'; I cannot know the pronunciations that Messner and Schokkin have responded to.

Second, Messner gives four classes of weii here. The woei that I have recorded in Baluan fall into Messner's category 2a (with some qualifications, as addressed below) and accordingly, that is the sense that I employ herein. I do not discount Messner's other categories and I have heard anecdotal evidence of his category 2d, but I have not (at least I am not aware that I have) encountered them directly in Baluan.

Messner (1981) further gives considerable insight into the deteriorating condition of these genres — and the changing usage of language within them — in 1981, citing his informants:

Polpolots are purely for entertainment and have no other functional purpose. They can be performed anywhere by anyone and at any time, and are purely for enjoyment and love. Nowadays, as the ritual and functional songs are being forgotten and since the traditional concept of our pre-Christian societal structure is no longer intact, polpolots have become the most important song type, replacing the sacred and 'awesome' ritual songs. Everything is getting mixed up.

These songs, as well as the words of the songs, stem from our forefathers. The words are in the Baluan language. Young people cannot understand the meaning of the old words anymore even though they were born on Baluan. Even some of the traditional polpolot songs are so old that they can only be sung by the elders who still understand the old language. The new polpolots are sung in today's language and no longer have any value (p. 439).

Since 1958, the term polpolot has also accumulated further meaning as a form of social ceremony whose intention is to regenerate aspects of tradition — *kastam* in Tok Pisin — that had been lost in the immediate post-war period (Otto, 1991, pp. 224-231).

POST-WORLD WAR II DEVELOPMENTS IN BALUAN

For reasons that become apparent below, consideration of polpolot must also take into account the post-World War II Paliau Movement and the figure central to that, Paliau

Maloat (c.1910-1991). Reformer, politician and semi-religious figure, Paliu casts a huge shadow on Baluan's post-war history. Originally from Lipan village in Baluan, Paliu became revered as a visionary throughout the entire Manus region and entered the first parliament of independent Papua New Guinea in 1975 representing Manus. (For detailed accounts of the nature of Paliu's reforms and his power base, see Otto, 1992b, and Schwartz, 1962.)

It was also Paliu who, in 1946, gave a small parcel of land on Baluan to the Titan-speaking people. The Titan had hitherto been the seafarers of the region, owning no land, but living in boats or in over-water settlements on island borders. Titan speakers (also known as the 'Manus' or 'Manus tru') are accordingly spread quite widely throughout the Manus region (Lewis, 2012, p. 8; Niles, 1980, p. 15; Ohnemus, 1998, pp. 5-9) as they can go wherever the sea goes. A Titan population had been living on the edge of Mouk Island, a small island off the north-east coast of Baluan; in 1946, Paliu granted them a parcel of land on Baluan, which is now called Mouk village. Mouk village is now the easternmost village in the north coast line of villages, neighbouring Lipan village immediately to the east of the latter (see Map 2). Paliu Maloat features directly and prominently in the polpolot song texts that I discuss below.

A central character to this study is Mela Popeu, chief of the Kooroole clan on Baluan and a powerful and influential elder of the island community. Mela had been close to Ngi Sanewai and Lapanin Solok, two of the most highly regarded historical singers of polpolot (both of whom have since passed away). While not known prominently as a singer in Baluan, Mela has told me he used to "sing casually" with Ngi Sanewai (also known as Sanewai Kileap) and Lapanin Solok. He has also composed several polpolot songs (two of which I investigate below) and instigated the 12-member polpolot choir in 2006, whose performance is central to this study.

My personal relationship to Mela is multi-layered. Mela adopted me into his clan while I was conducting my initial doctoral research on Baluan — a move that gave me a certain status in the island, which considerably facilitated important aspects of my research there by legitimising my relationships with people (Dalsgaard, 2009, pp. 27-28; Lewis, 2015, p. 56). I therefore have responsibilities to Mela as my clan chief. I count him also as a valued friend and informant. In recent years he has helped me considerably with confirming the texts of the songs examined herein, with translating them into English and with revealing and clarifying certain significant circumstances around the history of some of these songs. At the time of writing, Mela Popeu is no longer living in Baluan, but in Lae (Morobe Province), having been drawn there by a lecturing position at the Papua New Guinea University of Technology in that city. I have been able to have email contact with Mela from the time he moved to Lae in 2014 and I was fortunate to be able to spend face-to-face time with him there in January 2016 to review the material in this article and gain his perspective on the songs and their respective histories.

The polpolot songs that I have recorded and the four that I discuss herein, are from different periods of Baluan's history (including contemporary). I have recorded them from two different groups of performers on two different days, three years apart. On November 6th, 2003, I recorded the husband-and-wife duo of Ngat Kalou Solok and Alup Songo Molmole, and on December 20th, 2006, I recorded Mela Popeu's 12-member polpolot choir. All recordings were made in Lipan village on Baluan. In each body of recordings, the singers sang a range of songs, of which, for the purposes of this

paper, I focus on two from each occasion. A central factor in my choice of songs for discussion is the language in which each is sung — here we have four languages in four songs — and accordingly, the circumstantial reasons behind each respective choice of language.

In my representations of the songs texts below, I have shown the text in one, two or three lines, identified (as necessary) as Lines A, B and C. The lines represent different languages, different interpretations of language and/or translations into English, according to the nature of the sung text and further issues around it. The non-textual vocables are indicated in curly brackets in each instance.

NGAT KALOU SOLOK AND ALUP SONGO MOLMOLE

When I first arrived in Baluan in 2003, there remained around six elders on the island who still knew the older song styles (one of whom was Ngi Sanewai whom I have mentioned above). Two elders, Ngat Kalou Solok — the chief of Perelik village — and his wife Alup Songo Molmole (see Figure 1) were keen to sing some of these songs for my audio recorder and we were soon able to arrange a day to do this. In our recording, Ngat and Alup sang for me some kolorai, some woei and some polpilot songs. Ngat gave introductions to each piece (in Tok Pisin), explaining the different genres and the gender distinctions that define them. He explained that he and Alup were singing all three types, even though this was not strictly correct according to custom; but in times when singers were few, it was the only way they could preserve the songs.

I noted that some of the songs were in a language that I did not recognise. Enquiry confirmed that this language was the archaic form of Paluai. The first song text that I address below is one such song in the archaic form of Ngolan Paluai and I have been fortunate to get a translation of this text, and to learn some further detail about it, from Mela Popeu.

Mela informed me that this song was composed in 1966 by a man named Ngi Kondai. The song is about Paliau Maloat and the text is written from Paliau's perspective. According to Mela, the text is reputed to be words actually spoken by Paliau and documented by Ngi Kondai. Mela titles it '*Ngunanen Lalon Manus*', meaning 'Five Candidates in Manus'. The song is therefore from the period between the end of World War II and Papua New Guinea's political independence in 1975 (closer to the latter), a time when Paliau's power and prominence were at their peak. The pretext of this song is that Paliau is running for political office against five other candidates, to be the representative for Manus in the national parliament (prior to independence).



Figure 1 Alup Songo Molmole (left) and Ngat Kalou Solok (right)
(Photos by Tony Lewis, 2003)

Mela has confirmed that the language is the archaic form of Ngolan Paluai, and has further informed me that in this rendition of the song, Ngat and Alup are in fact not singing the words correctly; he wrote (in English) on my notes about this song: “Lyrics slightly distorted by the couple in view of their age and memory recall system. The theme is still there.” Mela claims to know the song, as composed by Ngi Kondai, and has accordingly been an invaluable source on its history. Mela has provided me with the original text that he says Kondai composed and the “slightly distorted” version that is actually sung here. In addition, Mela has given me a full English translation of this text.

In the representation of text that follows, line A represents the purported original song text as composed by Ngi Kondai, line B represents the text sung by Ngat and Alup, and line C represents Mela’s English translation of the text. With the benefit of viewing lines A and B in parallel, we can see that the differences between them are confined to the first stanza, with line B adding a few words that are not in line A.

Ngunanen Lalon Manus (Five Candidates in Manus)

Composed by Ngi Kondai (1966)

Genre: polpolot

Language: Ngolan Paluai (archaic form)

Singers: Ngat Kalou Solok and Alup Songo Molmole

Recorded by Tony Lewis in Lipan village on November 6th, 2003

Translation to English by Mela Popeu

Stanza 1:

A: {Or} Ngunan en lalon Manus osa yerit tini ong pwen

B: {Or} Ngunan en lalon Manus Ngunan pari ai or ranul, oyo yerit tini ong pwen

C: {Or} Five candidates in Manus cannot surpass me

- A: {Or} Osa yerit tini ong pwen osa yerit tini ong pwen, Minit en panuan tare, minit paro pung no minong.
 B: {Or} Osa yerit tini ong pwen osa yerit tini ong pwen, Minit en panuan tare, minit paro pung no minong.
 C: {Or} You will not surpass me, you will not surpass me. The policy of our place, this policy is still in my hands.

Stanza 2:

- A: Ngala lenghet piring kape kot a ee lep pang a irut, numai wolek ong lai ee ieng pakei or la ee.
 B: Ngala lenghet piring kape kot a ee lep pang a irut, numai wolek ong lai ee ieng pakei or la ee.
 C: I became a road to make clouds turn to rain. Old men appointed me to it and all gave me their blessings.

Stanza 3:

- A: {Ewo} Kinom wolek ila moyoi, iset lalon asembeli. Lawen gaben a eeranul kereng pelek isil koyou lanen sopol.
 B: {Ewo} Kinon wolek ila moyoi, iset lalon asembeli. Lawen gaben a eeranul kereng pelek isil koyou lanen naon
 C: {Ewo} My sign became a snake, in the assembly. All cabinet members were afraid with their hearts beating heavily.

Ngat Kalou Solok and Alup Songo Molmole also sang for me a number of songs in Tok Pisin, one of which I detail here. This song is titled ‘Papua Niugini’ (the name of the country in Tok Pisin), although I have been unable to establish the composer. The subject matter of the text is the independence of Papua New Guinea as a nation, which dates it at around 1975. Stanza 3 makes reference to ‘Paliau na Somare’ (‘Paliau and Somare’). ‘Paliau’ is a further reference to Paliau Maloat whom I have addressed above and who in 1975, entered the first national parliament of the newly independent nation as the Member for Manus. ‘Somare’ is a reference to Michael Somare, who was the first Prime Minister of independent Papua New Guinea, from 1975 to 1980, and was again Prime Minister for two later periods, 1982–1985 and 2002–2011.

In the representation of text that follows, line A represents the song text in Tok Pisin and line B represents the English translation of it. I have translated from Tok Pisin to English and I am grateful to Denis Crowdy and Lungol Popeu for providing some clarity regarding the Tok Pisin text and for amending minor errors in my translation.

Papua Niugini (Papua New Guinea)

Composer unknown (c.1975)

Genre: polpolot

Language: Tok Pisin

Singers: Ngat Kalou Solok and Alup Songo Molmole

Recorded by Tony Lewis in Lipan village on November 6th, 2003

Translation to English by Tony Lewis, with assistance from Denis Crowdy and Lungol Popeu

Stanza 1:

- A. {Or} Papua Niugini, {Ee} yumi Papua Niugini,
- B. {Or} Papua New Guinea, {Ee} we are Papua New Guinea,
- A. Yumi Papua Niugini, yumi go ahēt wok i go
- B. We are Papua New Guinea, we work to progress

Stanza 2:

- A. Kantri bilong Papua Niugini, nupela yang kantri,
- B. The country of Papua New Guinea, new young country,
- A. Lukaut gut long em
- B. Take good care of it

Stanza 3:

- A. {Ewo} Paliau na Somare, lukaut gut Papua Niugini.
- B. {Ewo} Paliau and Somare, take good care of Papua New Guinea.
- A. No ken sipoilim kantri, kantri bilong pipol
- B. You must not ruin this country, this country of the people.

That the language of the first song, ‘*Ngunanen Lalon Manus*’, is in the archaic form of Ngolan Paluai is not exceptional or surprising; the text concerns a Baluan leader who is coming to political prominence at both provincial and national levels. Moreover, the song was composed at a time when all polpolots were composed in that language. A song of this period did not need a reason to be composed in that language; rather, a song needed a reason not to be composed in that language. The second song, ‘*Papua Niugini*’, has such a reason. This text clearly concerns Papua New Guinean nationhood, as opposed to issues exclusive to Baluan or Manus. Figures central to the independence movement are mentioned in this song — specifically Paliau and Somare. The use of Tok Pisin, the official language of the new nation, for the text of this song reflects concern with national rather than local issues, as befits the period.

MELA POPEU’S POLPOLOT CHOIR

My visit to Baluan in December 2006 coincided with the inaugural Balopa Cultural Festival, named after the Local Level Government area of Balopa that includes Baluan, and held in Lipan village. Many performing groups — garamut groups, dancing groups, stringben groups, church groups — and audience members came from different parts of Baluan, broader Manus and from Port Moresby, to attend this event. Apart from myself, the international community was represented by a cohort of eight anthropologists from Denmark, led by Professor Ton Otto. At this festival, Mela Popeu unveiled a 12-member polpolot choir (see Figure 2).

The songs presented by this choir constitute a clear developmental line from the original polpolot form, being sung syllabically, and preserving the broad and loosely strophic structure of three stanzas, each repeated, the third beginning with the

characteristic vocable ‘e-wo’. There is some variation; the yaret is more melodically developed, beginning (roughly) a minor third above the home note and rising to a fourth, before descending to the home note. The yaret then adds a second, melodically reduced phrase (see Example 3). Conveniently for my transcriptions, and for purposes of comparison, the yaret in my recorded performances also begins close to the note E.



Figure 2 Mela Popeu’s twelve-member polpolot choir (Mela Popeu is the second person from the right, standing up)(Photo by Tony Lewis, 2006)



Example 3 A yaret sung by Mela Popeu’s polpolot choir (transcribed by Tony Lewis)

In this case there is no ‘second voice’ as such, but a chorus of 11 ‘second’ voices constituting the *isiol*; this part does not follow the first part into the introductory passage, but joins on the second line, thus creating more of a ‘call-and-response’ relationship with the yaret.

There is further melodic development in the ensuing ensemble stanzas, with upper part sometimes beginning a minor third above the home note (the same starting point as the opening solo voice).

With the multitude of voices now taking part, and with the approximate nature of the pitching, the sound is rich with beat frequencies and their ensuing harmonic complexities. It appears — though is difficult to determine absolutely — that the lower part, rather than holding a fixed pitch, is dropping a major second as the upper part rises a minor second, creating an interval of a minor third (as distinct from the second of the earlier style of polpolot — see Example 4).



Example 4 Typical movement between the two parts in the songs of Mela Popeu's polpolot choir (transcribed by Tony Lewis)

The result is that the choir's performances cover a total range of a major sixth in Western scale terms (from A to F# in Example 3), expanded from the perfect fourth of the earlier recordings.

Nevertheless, the choir's songs are recognisably polpolot, and represent a continuation of the indigenous practice in a way that the introduced song forms do not. At the same time, the choir represents an innovation, in particular in the way the enlarged group becomes more socially inclusive than the two-person version. This is pure supposition on my part, but it appears that the choir is following an example set by the introduced song forms — stringben and hymnody — in the sense that both involve larger groups of singers and/or musicians, and are consequently more socially inclusive than the original indigenous genres.

The most interesting development in the choir's repertoire, however, is in their choice of languages. The songs are principally in contemporary Ngolan Paluai, apart from one song in English and one in the archaic form of Paluai — in fact the latter is a rendition of *Ngunanen Lalon Manus*, the same song I have documented above as sung by Ngat Kalou Solok and Alup Songo Molmole. There are no songs at all in Tok Pisin. Having been initiated for the purpose of performing at the Balopa Cultural Festival, it appears clear that the choir's repertoire is also geared to this event; accordingly, the English text, and some of the Paluai texts, are concerned with welcoming visitors to Baluan for the Festival.

The choir's songs (with the exception of 'Ngunanen Lalon Manus') were composed by Mela Popeu, so I have been fortunate to gain the composer's perspective on them, and on the nature of the choir. Whereas I initially thought the choir format to be Mela's creation, having nowhere encountered any prior mention of it, neither in the literature nor in Baluan, Mela informed me in an email (October 6th, 2014) that in fact, Lapanin Solok had initiated the choir format in the 1970s for a choir festival in Manus, where it won a 'special prize'.

In the same email, Mela told me that he learnt to compose polpolot "by singing casually with ... Ngi Sanewai and Lapanin Solok," and revealed that he had not known that there had been an earlier form of the Paluai language, until he encountered the texts of the polpolot he was learning to sing. "When I grew up and started speaking our language", wrote Mela, "I did not know that it was a contemporary one. It was from the polpolot wordings that made me [realise] that there exist[ed] [an earlier] Paluai language."

Regarding his use of contemporary Paluai language in the choir compositions, Mela explained this to me (email, October 6th, 2014): "Why we departed from Paluai language, is what I do not really understand. So since we were not [taught] the original language, I will be foolish to [compose] polpolot on language I am not used to. In fact a good meaningful polpolot of original language [that] is not understood by listeners of this generation, [loses] its value."

I present below the text of Mela's composition '*Polo en Balopa Festival*' (*Flag of Balopa Festival*), which he composed in 2006 and premiered at this Balopa Festival. The song is directly and unambiguously concerned with the Festival, as is quite evident from the title alone. Stanza 3 makes reference to 'Soanin a President' ('Soanin and President'). 'Soanin' refers Soanin Kilangit, the Baluan elder who conceived and produced the festival, and 'President' refers to the President of the festival committee, who happened to be Mela Popeu himself. The stanza also mentions the Governor (*kavena*); this refers to Governor Jacob Jumagot, who at that time was Governor of the Manus Province, and who was in attendance at the festival's opening ceremony. The text also uses the concept of 'Urop' ('Europe') to represent more broadly the developed world.

In the representation of text that follows, line A represents the song text in contemporary Ngolan Paluai, and line B represents the English translation as written by Mela Popeu.

Polo en Balopa Festival (Flag of Balopa Festival)

Composed by Mela Popeu (2006)

Genre: polpolot

Language: Ngolan Paluai (contemporary)

Singers: Mela Popeu's polpolot choir

Recorded by Tony Lewis in Lipan village on December 20th, 2006

Translation to English by Mela Popeu

Stanza 1:

- A. {Ee} Polo en Balopa Festival, polouen ien wopop
- B. {Ee} Flag of Balopa Festival, its flag is flying.
- A. Ian yuwai lapenen sopol apai, lapenen sopol pungum
- B. It is calling the chiefs of the west, the chiefs of the east.

Stanza 2:

- A. Are kame kaporokek; karowek aronan Paluai
- B. You come and strengthen it; and show the 'way of Baluan'
- A. Kilai rowekan not monok, ai salen yiwan kokon kisi panu
- B. To show the children of behind [of the future], as a means to attract money home.

Stanza 3:

- A. {Ewo} Soanin a president, au kaning kavena kiyam salen la pien
- B. {Ewo} Soanin and President, you see the Governor, to consider it well
- A. Kipuksalen tap Balopa kale ning Urop
- B. To open the way for Balopa to visit Europe (Outside world).

The fourth polpolot that I address here is Mela Popeu's composition in English, which his choir also premiered at the Balopa Festival in 2006. This song, titled 'Festival Welcome', is also directly concerned with that festival, being a welcome message to all visitors to Baluan. The words 'rocky land' and 'so rocky, so stoney [sic]' in the first stanza reflect the Baluan Islanders' perception of their homeland, being a volcanic

island with plentiful basalt protuberances that dot the coast line and find their way under every footstep. The third stanza makes direct reference to Governor Jumagot of the Manus Province, which ties the song specifically to the opening ceremony of the festival, at which the Governor was present, and to whom this song was sung.

Mela's choir rehearsed for the festival performance in an open sheltered area in his home in Lipan village (this area can be seen in Figure 2 above). The song texts they were rehearsing were written in chalk on a chalkboard wall of the house. Figure 3 shows the English text of Festival Welcome, as written on this chalkboard, with other song texts to the left and below.

As this song text is in English, there is no need for translation, nor for different lines in the representation below.

Festival Welcome

Composed by Mela Popeu (2006)

Genre: polpolot

Language: English

Singers: Mela Popeu's polpolot choir

Recorded by Tony Lewis in Lipan village on December 20th, 2006

Stanza 1:

{Ee} From north to south, east to west

Welcome to you one and all to Balopa Cultural Festival

Special welcome to newcomers to rocky land of Baluan

So rocky, so stoney, but still it is our loveland

Stanza 2:

This festival is here today and gone tomorrow

So please enjoy and participate while you can

Right in your eyes you will see Balopians come to life, depicting cultural tradition

Right in your eyes you will see Balopians come to life, depicting colourful tradition

Stanza 3:

{Ewo} Governor Jumagot, may you have a nice day.

Balopa has the will but doesn't know the way. Can you find us the way?

{Ewo} Governor Jumagot, may you have a nice day.

Balopa has the will but doesn't know the way. Can you show us the way?

A structural feature of this song that I have not observed in other polpolot in any language is that in two particular instances a line is repeated but with a single word changed in order to give a slightly different meaning. In stanza 2, we hear the words 'depicting cultural tradition' and in the repeat of that line, it changes to 'depicting colourful tradition'. In stanza 3, the words 'can you *find* us the way?' are changed in the repeat to 'can you *show* us the way?' While not elsewhere apparent in the Baluan song genres that I have encountered, Niles (2015, p. xlv) points out that this practice of parallelism "is a very common poetic feature found in all regions of Papua New

Guinea.” Niles (pp. xlv-xlv) then documents a number of such instances from around Papua New Guinea, and the academic sources that address them.

I asked Mela by email why he chose to compose this song in English and he replied by email (October 6th, 2014): “I used [E]nglish wordings instead of pidgin, in the welcome song basically for those non Baluan to hear and also I wanted the women singers of the group, all of village levels, to have fun with [E]nglish words.”

This choice of languages in Mela Popeu’s compositions appears to be simultaneously looking inward and outward. The use of contemporary Ngolan Paluai looks inward to what is unique about Baluan, and at the same time using a language that is understood by most Baluan Islanders today; the use of English leapfrogs Tok Pisin, as it were, and looks outward, past broader Papua New Guinea, to a potentially international audience.



Figure 3 The English text of Mela Popeu’s polpolot *Festival Welcome*, written on a chalkboard at Mela’s home in Lipan village (photo by Tony Lewis, 2006)

CONCLUSION — OUR LIBRARIES ARE CLOSING DOWN

Through these four polpolot songs, composed over a 40-year period (1966 to 2006), we have seen developments in formal structure, presentation format and language usage. In formal structure, the range of the songs has expanded a little from a perfect fourth to a major sixth, and there is greater melodic development, particularly in the yaret section. The lower of the two vocal parts has developed a tendency to move between two pitches, rather than remain on a fixed pitch. It is possible, or even probable, however, that such changes reflect the personal preferences of the singers involved in each case, rather than constituting enduring modifications to the character of polpolot. On the other hand, that

which is performed is what is generally passed on to emerging generations, rather than that which is not performed.

The presentation format has opened up considerably with the concept of the choir. First conceived by Lapanin Solok in the 1970s, Mela Popeu has revived this concept in 2006 for a specific festival context. While Mela's choir incorporated 12 members, the concept of a choir can necessarily remain open to as many people as wish to take part. While there remain only two distinct vocal parts, the change fundamentally means that there are now multiple voices to each part, as opposed to the single voice in the original duet model. While the multiple voices certainly create a bigger and richer sound, this development has more significance socially than musically, as it is more socially inclusive, reflecting the inclusive nature of the introduced song forms of stringben and hymnody.

Perhaps the most significant development over this 40-year period has been in the use of language. We have seen four different languages used, each for a specific context and purpose. The original archaic form of Ngolan Paluai was in 1966, the established language of polpolot. The nationalist sentiments associated with independence in 1975 saw a shift to Tok Pisin as the language of polpolot, reflecting pride and aspirations in nationhood through use of the new official language. The Balopa Festival of 2006 saw contemporary Ngolan Paluai used as a language that was meaningful to the current population of Baluan, and the use of English to reflect a wish to welcome, and communicate with, the broader world beyond Manus and Papua New Guinea — with 'Urop'.

These innovations have occurred in a time of globalisation that has brought rapid changes to Papua New Guinea, as to many other parts of the developing world. Music within Baluan has seen considerable growth in introduced song forms, principally stringben and hymnody, that have threatened the indigenous genres with extinction. The innovations in polpolot have seen the genre evolve to embrace the changes, to adapt to changing times through developments in language usage and performance format, both of which have the effect of being more inclusive of the current Baluan population; the use of contemporary Ngolan Paluai allows listeners to engage meaningfully with the song texts and the choir format allows many more people to actively participate in performance.

These changes do not happen without loss, however, and that which seems destined for extinction — if not already effectively extinct — is the archaic form of the Paluai language. Although on the one hand Mela Popeu is leading the changes, on the other, he is acutely aware of what is being lost and is genuinely saddened by it. Not having ever learnt or spoken the original Paluai language, however, there is little he can realistically now do to preserve it. What he can do — and is doing — is preserve the genre of polpolot.

On more than one occasion, Mela has used a literary metaphor to express his feelings of loss. In an email (October 8th, 2014) he told me how much he had learnt about polpolot from Lapanin Solok "before he closed the book". When I sat with Mela and spoke to him in person in Lae (January 4th, 2016), he expressed deep concern at the loss of the original Paluai language. Mela and I were discussing the passing of Ngi Sanewai, one of the revered singers of polpolot in original language. Mela looked me in the eye and said, with palpable remorse, "our libraries are closing down".

ENDNOTES

¹ Messner (1981, p.433) makes mention of the language of Baluan as ‘Ngola(m)banu okamo’. Not having encountered this name myself in Baluan, I wondered if this was perhaps a reference to the archaic form of Paluai. Having consulted further with the Paluai speaking community in Port Moresby, however, I am informed that the term actually means “another language”.

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BIOGRAPHY

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