

THE VINVEVEO DANCE OF PENTECOST

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The *Vinveveo* dance, performed on the island of Pentecost in Vanuatu, is associated with the traditional family land and reminds a particular clan of its origin. The main dance group is made up of at least a hundred men whose bodies are decorated with the *veveo* leaf. The men emerge from the bush with a crawling movement in a long single line which gradually twists into coils like a snake, as it proceeds towards the village. The dancers move with great enthusiasm, encouraged by a drummer who sets the rhythm for their steps and their singing, by beating vigorously on his bamboo drum. The leader of the dance carries a live rooster and at regular intervals the singing and dancing will stop while the leader calls, "Toa vai Vinveveo" (the rooster of Vinveveo).

Meanwhile, the women are dancing in a circle a few yards away from the main dancing group, with their hands raised. The women have painted their bodies black and white in imitation of the sea snake and this signifies the totem of the clan whose land is Vinveveo. The dancers are dressed in traditional woven mats of various colours, called *bari*. The *bari*, which is about four feet long and eight inches wide, is passed between the legs and fastened by a belt at the waist at both the front and the back. Fresh leaves, of the same tree from which the mats are woven, are also used to decorate the bodies of the dancers.

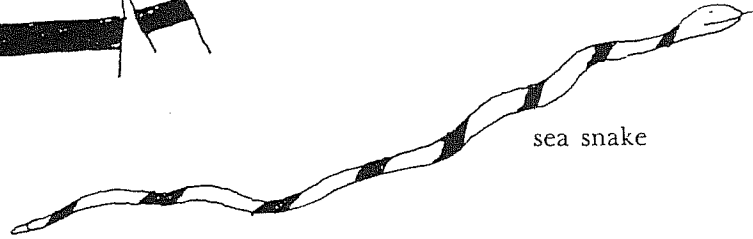
When they arrive at the main dancing area in the centre of the village, the men form into about forty separate lines, each headed by a leader. The women are no longer permitted to dance in front of them but retire to the back to dance in a semi-circle. Eventually, the dancers stop singing their first song and the leader hands over the live rooster to the head of the clan. Then the dancing begins again.

In the meantime, a group of young boys have been disguising themselves in the bush, by rubbing mud on their bodies or by covering

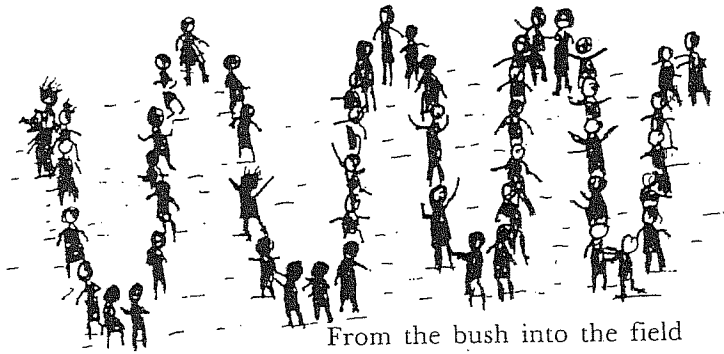
Alufurrai, Alfred ... [et al.], 1987. Pacific rituals: living or dying?
IPS, USP, Fiji



Body paint



sea snake



From the bush into the field



In the dancing field

themselves with bush leaves. The drummer beats a signal for them to appear, and in front of the dancing group they act a story that is associated with the land. During this performance the dancers continue their dancing and eventually the actors join and merge with them. The dancing then continues for two or three hours until finally the coiling line disappears back into the bush again in the same way as it originally emerged.

Each of the objects, patterns and actors has a deeper meaning. The rooster symbolizes the people of the village, settled on the land, because the rooster is to be found where the people live. It also signifies peace in the land. The sea snake comes out of its hole only when it needs food. Being the totem of this particular clan, it signifies that the people should stay on their land and develop it, just as the sea snake stays in its hole. The veveo is a pandanus, the leaf of which the women use to weave mats and baskets. It is a plant which is seen to keep the women together to work as a team. The word *envuroi* occurs frequently in the songs. It means virgin bush or land, and when a man hears this word he is likely to feel encouraged to cultivate the land or else he may feel disturbed because the dancers are saying that the clan from Vinveveo are lazy people because they do not cultivate the land. The raised hands of the women indicate worship. They praise a god who gives the talents and skill for men to recognize their ownership of the land, and to know the words used in the singing. Many of these words are from a very old form of the language and are not understood unless they are combined with the action of the dancing.

The main purpose of the Vinveveo dance ritual is that it reaffirms for them and others the awareness of the landowners of their hereditary rights and of the benefits to be derived from their home lands. It defines who belongs and who does not, and reinforces coherence of the community. The clan lands, which have been handed down from the ancestors to the present generation are depicted as very important and it is made clear that no member of the clan has the right to sell land for money. The land has a mythical history which the ritual depicts and confirms by using particular objects and songs, without which the dancing would be false. During the dancing, the meaning of the myth comes out very clearly, even to the children. Parents explain to children the meaning of the objects carried or worn by the dancers and also why certain words are used in the songs. The dance also gives recognition to status. The handing over of the rooster by the dancing leader to the head of the clan, indicates to the spectators that the recipient is the *ratahigi*, the chief.

The vinveveo dance is still performed today but is regarded by the church as a purely secular ceremony. Regarding the traditional dances as evil, the early Christian missionaries built small church buildings,

indicating clearly that they were not places in which dancing was expected to take place. Christian worship took a very different form. It was quiet and solemn and only the leader could talk, pray or read the Bible. The people were permitted to sing only briefly at certain set times. The role of the people was largely a listening one. Thus was lost to the church all the vigour, movement, symbolism, visual attraction and expression of shared emotion of the traditional dance. If some of these elements could be restored to Christian worship today it may become far more meaningful.

It is true that there are certain holy objects visible in Christian worship which point people to the origins of the faith and these could well be incorporated into dance and drama. Even children readily recognize the palm branch as a symbol for the events of palm Sunday. It is meaningful for them because the coconut branch is not a foreign object, but something they associate with their everyday life. I cannot see why Christians should not express their faith through dancing which incorporates the use of familiar but significant objects. Such dancing creates feelings of belonging to a community. It is an expression of the fact that one's personal world is associated with the unseen spirit living in the unseen world. Through it, a powerful message can be communicated to the people.