

*Poia atu / mai (?) taku poi – The Polynesian Origins of Poi*

**Karyn Paringatai**

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**Introduction**

*Poi* is recognised around the world as a performance item unique to Māori. The word *poi* refers to a Māori dance or game performed with a ball-like object, to which a cord of varying length is attached. *Poi* refers to both the ball and the dance, which normally includes hitting and swinging the ball on its string, usually accompanied by music or a chant of some kind. One of New Zealand's most renowned anthropologists, Sir Peter Buck, who was an authoritative figure spearheading the research into the material culture of the Māori, states that "the women's *poi* dance ... used an accessory in the form of the *poi* ball which is unique for Polynesia."<sup>1</sup> This is a common view of *poi*. However, this paper questions the uniqueness of *poi* to the Māori people by showing that the origins of *poi* can be found in other regions of Polynesia. Specifically, it will trace the movement of *poi* from Western to Eastern Polynesia; the same path taken by Māori during their migration to New Zealand. It will look at ball games from islands throughout Polynesia with forms and functions similar to those of *poi* to demonstrate the evolution of *poi* towards its use in Māori society. *Poia atu taku poi*, *wania atu taku poi* (swing far my *poi*, skim onward my *poi*) are the age-old words used figuratively in *poi* compositions to send the *poi* on a journey over the land and its people; visiting mountains, rivers, forests, villages, *whānau* (families), *hapū* (sub-tribes), and *iwi* (tribes). The words demonstrate the importance of the connections a composer of *poi* compositions has with each of the above entities. Using this saying I pose the question: *Poia atu taku poi? Poia mai taku poi?* Did Māori send the *poi* to the world or was the *poi* sent to them?

**Polynesian origins of *poi***

In almost all of Eastern Polynesia, *poi* is a term for a type of dish where food such as *taro* and breadfruit are mixed with water and mashed into a pulp. In New Zealand the food dish *poi* was not a part of the staple diet of the Māori people hence this meaning became obsolete. The term remained, however, and became associated with the *poi* ball and dance. Various meanings of the term *poi*, as given in the Williams' *Dictionary of Maori Language*, include "Ball, lump, swing, twirl, toss up and down, make into a ball."<sup>23</sup> This part of the paper will aim to show how these definitions came to be applied to *poi* by looking at its Polynesian origins.

One of the games found almost everywhere in Polynesia, which involves tossing ball-like objects up and down, is juggling. In Tonga this game is known as *hiko*. *Hiko* involves

throwing up five balls “... discharging them from the left hand, catching them in the right, and transferring them to the left again, and so on... keeping always four balls in the air at once.”<sup>4</sup> It is usually played by women and a recitation of verses occurs at the same time, the purpose of which is to help keep time. An interesting feature of this is that one of the Māori meanings of *hiko*, in its repeated form *hikohiko*, is to “recite genealogy, indicating principal names on line and omitting others.”<sup>5</sup> In some cases, traditional *poi* compositions<sup>6</sup> incorporated recitations of genealogy or *hikohiko*.

In Uvea or Wallis Island, situated slightly north-west of Tonga: “Juggling (*hapo*) is an amusement for young girls. It is done nowadays with oranges ... The motions are made in time to a little song. Juggling contests are sometimes held among the girls, some of whom are said to be able to keep 4, 5, or 6 oranges in the air at a time.”<sup>7</sup>

The Samoan juggling game, *fuaga*, consisted of “throwing up a number of oranges into the air, six, seven, eight, and the object was to keep the whole number in motion at once.”<sup>8</sup> The first player sometimes takes as many as eight oranges, throwing them successively into the air, and endeavours to keep the whole in motion at once. *Fuaga* is principally a girl’s game played in groups whilst sitting or standing. The aim of the game is to see who can juggle the objects the longest.

In the northern Cook Islands, is the Pukapukan version of juggling called *tilitili koua*. *Tilitili koua* is a game played by both children and adults in which immature coconuts (*koua*) are juggled in time to a chant. In competition the aim of the game is to juggle continuously until the end of the chant. Unlike in Tonga and Samoa three *koua* are usually used with experts being able to juggle four.<sup>9</sup> This dramatic difference in number is probably due to the size and shape of the objects being used.

In the southern Cook Islands, ball tossing or juggling is known by a different name, *pe’i* and *pe’ipe’i*. Here the objects used in the juggling used are either the fruit of the candlenut tree (*Aleurites moluccana*), the seeds of the *tamanu* tree (*Calophyllum mophyllum*), or more commonly oranges; quite different from the *koua* used in the northern Cook Islands. These balls were tossed vertically and transferred from one hand to another in an anti-clockwise direction, accompanied with chanted verses. To use seven or eight balls was to be an expert, while juggling four balls was considered easy. The aim of the game was to see who could keep a number of balls going for a good length of time.<sup>10</sup>

In Tuamotu, the term *pei* is also used to describe juggling. Here four, five, or six balls are used. “One ball is held in the left hand the others, up to four, are held in the right. With five or six, those that cannot be held in the hand are placed in the lap. The right hand tosses all the balls in it, then the left hand passes its ball to the right, catches the first ball tossed up by right hand and passes it quickly to the right hand, then being ready to catch the next ball, establishing a counterclockwise rotation. Some experts can reverse and make the difficult clock wise rotation. With each tossing of a ball from the left to the right hand, a word of a chant is pronounced”<sup>11</sup>

*Pei* in Tuamotu uses balls made of either pandanus leaf (permanent) or strips of plaited coconut leaf, which form the *popo* (ball). This is significant in that this is the first mention of balls being made of plants, similar to the *poi* balls of New Zealand. The game of *pei* is often also classified as a dance; Edwin Burrows provides an example of a chant used that he calls either a *haka* (dance) or a *pei*.<sup>12</sup> This is extremely interesting, as early observers of New Zealand *poi* have provided the term *haka poi* for a *poi* dance.<sup>13</sup>

A ball tossing game called *pei* or *kita'irama* is also recorded in Mangareva. The term *kita'irama* derives from two words *kita'i* (to keep a number of balls in the air at once, to throw high) and *rama* (green fruit of the candlenut that formed the balls). *Pei*, however, is consistent with the name of the game found in other Eastern Polynesian islands.<sup>14</sup> Two terms provided, *pe'i* and *pei*, have often been confused with each other because various early dictionaries failed to recognise the glottal difference between the two words. *Pe'i* is the dance accompaniment of songs and *pei* is the action, of throwing balls in the air.<sup>15</sup> This is not too dissimilar to the term *poi*, which is often given the definition of being either the dance or the ball accompaniment.

*Pei* in Mangareva was very popular among the women only and often played at festivals and competitions, where the winner would receive a reward or prize. The winner was the person who could keep the same number of balls going the longest with an accompanying chanted song. As soon as a player dropped a ball, that player would retire until only one was left.<sup>16</sup> It appeared that *pei* was a favourite of chiefs who would command exhibitions and reward the winners. *Pei* was associated with the prenatal ceremonies of an expectant princess,<sup>17</sup> and as part of the entertainment for visitors at ceremonies associated with death;<sup>18</sup> all of which shows the importance of the game within Mangareva.

Juggling in the Marquesas Islands was also a prominent game that included the recitation of genealogy. *Pei* “was a mother’s game invented to teach children their genealogies and give the mothers a chance to boast of the number of their offspring.”<sup>19</sup> It appears the game in this context was not as competitive as in other islands, but more good-humoured. The mothers would use either two candlenuts or two balls made of *fau* leaves (*Hibiscus tiliaceus*) bound with *pandanus* (*Pandanus odoratus/latifolius*) strips. This chant consisted of reciting the children’s genealogy and mentioning important names of that child’s *whakapapa*,<sup>20</sup> which is again similar to traditional *poi* compositions.

In Tahiti, the term *pei* is “the name of an amusement in which stones or limes are thrown and caught.”<sup>21</sup> While little is written on the Tahitian game of *pei* it can be assumed from the description given, that it is similar to *pei* in other Polynesian islands.

The idea of round objects being tossed up in the air making a circular pattern, similar to the pattern created when a *poi* is swung in a simple circle, obviously has its genesis in Polynesia. The distinguishing characteristic between *poi* and juggling is the attachment of a chord. This part of the paper will show that the addition of a chord being used to swing a ball-like object around also has its beginnings in Polynesia.

A Tongan game that involves the use of a ball being tossed up and down, is called *hapo*. *Hapo* has been described as being similar to the ‘cup and ball’ game. *Hapo* consists of “a wooden rod some four feet long, at one end of which was fastened a strip of tortoiseshell whose ends had been bent to form a semicircular opening. At the opposite end of the stick a string was extended and attached to a small, round gourd. The length of the cord was just sufficient to allow the gourd to be tossed into the air and dropped through the tortoiseshell opening at the opposite end of the rod.”<sup>22</sup>

A game of a similar description, *pala’ie*, is also found in Hawai’i, where an oval ball of white tapa, rather than a small gourd was used. The aim of the game “... was to toss the ball upward within the limits of the length of string and catch it in the loop as it descended.”<sup>23</sup> The objective of this game was to see who could manipulate the ball to go through the hoop the longest without missing.

In Samoa, the game *tuimuri* or *tuimuli*, also involves the suspension and swinging of a ball-like object. Players are divided into two groups, seated in a circle and supplied with a small, sharp stick. In the middle of the circle an orange is suspended from a string. “The orange is swung round, and as it passes each one [player] endeavours to pierce it ... The party wins who first succeeds in fairly hitting the oranges fifty times.”<sup>24</sup> In Fiji, the game is known as *veivasa ni moli*.

In the Marquesas Islands, *pohutu*, another ball game that employs the balls used in *pei* with a chord attached is played. “The game was played by a single child who held the pandanus strip in one hand and batted the ball with the other, or by two children, one of whom held the strip while the other struck the ball ... The *pei* game ... suggests a close resemblance between the *pohutu* and the well known *poi* balls used by the Maori.”<sup>25</sup> This observation is significant in that a connection between *pohutu*, *pei* and *poi* has, for the first time, been made. From the author’s perspective, there is an obvious relationship between Māori *poi* and juggling in the wider Polynesian area.

### **Aotearoa/New Zealand**

The Māori culture that early explorers encountered on their first visits to New Zealand originated from the tropical Pacific. Māori culture had adjusted and evolved to the New Zealand environment. In terms of *poi*, what early explorers observed was a game that had been transported from Polynesia and, thus, one that they had most likely encountered in other forms elsewhere in the Pacific. They failed, however, to recognise it as a developed form of the pan-Polynesian forms described above because of the changes to *poi*. A change of resources and an increased complexity in production is likely to have caused *poi* to have become a more valued and treasured item than the early explorers, who viewed it as a puerile amusement, had possibly thought.

Various writers on New Zealand history and, in particular, Māori social life and customs have recorded their own observations of *poi*. Many of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century studies were based on mere observation and misperception; very rarely was there any in-depth analysis of *poi*. New Zealand’s early written accounts of juggling are limited to a report from Ernst Dieffenbach who wrote: “they have a game

with four balls, exactly like that of the Indian jugglers, and they accompany it with a song.”<sup>26</sup> Although this description is very brief and the name of the game is not recorded, it falls into line with the other records of Polynesian juggling discussed thus far. Other notable researchers who worked extensively in recording Māori ethnographies did not record Dieffenbach’s observations of juggling, but this does not mean juggling did not exist.

It was not until 1920 that Herries Beattie’s<sup>27</sup> ethnological project on the Māori of the South Island validated Dieffenbach’s observations. The project revealed that in various areas, namely Murihiku, Canterbury, Nelson and Westland,<sup>28</sup> *poi* was remarkably similar to the juggling style of Polynesia yet quite distinctive from North Island *poi*. In Canterbury, an informant from the Tuahiwi region (north of Christchurch) told Beattie that “poi was throwing up and catching pebbles in various orders.”<sup>29</sup> In Murihiku, two balls without strings were sometimes tossed up and caught. In fact, according to one Murihiku informant *poi*, in its juggling form, started at Opunake in Taranaki. Another alternative form of *poi* recorded in Murihiku involved the players kneeling, sitting or standing facing each other with the balls being thrown back and forth to each other. A similar account was recorded in Nelson where *poi* was likened to boxing.<sup>30</sup>

The fact that juggling was only known to have occurred in the South Island provides another connection between South Island *poi* and its origins in Eastern Polynesia. Contemporary linguists have discovered that dialects from the East Coast of the North Island and the South Island are extremely close to the languages of the southern Cook Islands.<sup>31</sup> This is probably due to the migration of Māori from the East Coast to the South Island prior to European arrival. Linguists have also recognised that the South Island dialect has features which suggest close contact with the Marquesas Islands.<sup>32</sup> Both these links are supported by the similarity of the South Island version of *poi* to games played in both these places, such as with Murihiku *poi* and Marquesas *pei*.

In Eastern Polynesia the term *pei* and various forms of the word (*peipei*, *pe’i*) are often associated with throwing or juggling ball-like objects in the air. An alternative meaning of *poi* also means to throw or toss something. *Pei* is also used as the name of the ball and likewise *poi* is also used for the term ‘ball’. The term *pei* suggests a strong linguistic link between Eastern Polynesia and New Zealand. There is well-documented research of movement from ‘ei’ to ‘ai’ evidenced in dialectal variations, for example *kei* and *kai*, *hei* and *hai*. It is also possible, therefore, that there was a further movement from ‘ai’ to ‘oi’ given the movement from ‘a’ to ‘o’ documented in Tregear.<sup>33</sup> In Western Polynesia, the same type of juggling occurred with the names *hiko*, *hapo* and *fuaga* being the terms used in Tonga, Uvea and Samoa respectively. The word *hiko* is used as an aspect of *pātere* and *oriori* in Māori; the recitation of principal names in order to dispel certain derogatory rumours, and lullabies informing high-born children of their genealogy, respectively. Both are traditional accompaniments to *poi*.

## Conclusion

The assumption that the *poi* ball is unique to New Zealand is incorrect. The *poi* ball originates from Polynesia in a simpler form than what we know it to be today. In New

Zealand the food dish *poi*, found widely in Eastern Polynesia, was not a part of the staple diet of the Māori people therefore this meaning became obsolete. However, the term remained and came to take on new definitions. The pan-Polynesian game of juggling can be seen as the predecessor of *poi*. The fact that the two terms *pei* and *poi*, and their various similar meanings in New Zealand and Eastern Polynesia have undergone such little linguistic change strongly suggests that the *poi* ball is not unique to New Zealand as has been commonly thought.

The game where a ball attached to a string is swung around is not unique to New Zealand. The ‘cup and ball’ game popular in Tonga (*hapo*) and Hawai’i (*pala’ie*) is similar to the motions of *poi*. While the object of this game may be different to *poi* the manual dexterity required of the wrist in order to manipulate the flight path of the ball attached to a string is similar to the actions needed to execute the *poi*. *Veivasa ni moli* in Fiji and *tuimuli* in Samoa may be quite different from *poi* in terms of the aim of the game, but again the fact that a ball like object is swung on a string connects the two. The Marquesan game of *pohutu*, a ball attached to a handle batted about, was compared with *poi* in 1923, but this intriguing comparison was never elaborated on or followed up by subsequent writers.

*Pei* in Eastern Polynesia did not develop into a dance accompaniment. It remained a game or amusement, which the early explorers and subsequent missionaries categorised it as being. It is possible that once put into this category, it was never allowed to evolve into a performing arts utility. *Poi* in New Zealand was also seen as merely a game by early explorers, but the development of *poi* away from being a game and its inclusion in the area of performing arts began prior to European arrival. This paper has examined the origins of *poi* in relation to claims that the *poi* ball is unique to Māori. *Pei*, *hiko*, *hapo*, *fuaga*, *tuimuli*, *veivasa ni moli* and *pohutu* can be seen as the progenitors of *poi* and a progression of these related games can be traced from Western to Eastern Polynesia, with a similar form being found in the South Island of New Zealand.

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- 1 P Buck, *The Coming of the Maori*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Wellington: Maori Purposes Fund Board, 1950), 243.
  - 2 HW Williams, *Dictionary of the Maori Language*. 7th edition (Wellington: GP Publications, 1971), 288.
  - 3 W Mariner, *An Account of the Natives of the Tonga Islands* (London: John Murray, 1817), 344.
  - 4 Williams, *Dictionary of the Maori Language*, 50.
  - 5 Traditional *poi* compositions include *pātere*, derisive songs used to dispel derogatory rumours, and *oriori*, lullabies composed for the children of chiefs educating them in matters appropriate to their descent.
  - 6 EG Burrows, *Ethnology of Uvea (Wallis Island)*, Bulletin 145 (Honolulu: Bernice P Bishop Museum, 1937), 154.
  - 7 JB Stair, *Old Samoa, or, Flotsam and Jetsam from the Pacific Ocean* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1897; reprint Papakura: Southern Reprints, 1983), 138.
  - 8 E & P Beaglehole, *Ethnology of Pukapuka*, Bulletin 150 (Honolulu: Bernice P Bishop Museum, 1938), 361.

- 9 P Buck, *Arts and Crafts of the Cook Islands*, Bulletin 179 (Honolulu: Bernice P Bishop Museum, 1944), 250.
- 10 KP Emory, *Material Culture of the Tuamotu Archipelago* (Honolulu: Bernice P Bishop Museum, 1944), 233.
- 11 EG Burrows, *Native music of the Tuamotus*, Bulletin 109 (Honolulu: Bernice P Bishop Museum, 1933), 37.
- 12 E Best, *Games and Pastimes of the Maori: An Account of Various Exercises, Games and Pastimes of the Natives of New Zealand, as practised in former times; including some information containing their Vocal and Instrumental Music* (Wellington: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1925), 54.
- 13 P Buck, *Ethnology of Mangareva*, Bulletin 157 (Honolulu: Bernice P. Bishop Museum, 1938), 185.
- 14 Ibid., 185.
- 15 Ibid., 185.
- 16 Ibid., 107.
- 17 Ibid., 186.
- 18 ESC Handy, *The Native Culture in the Marquesas*, Bulletin 9 (Honolulu: Bernice P Bishop Museum, 1923), 302.
- 19 Ibid., 302.
- 20 J Davies, *A Tahitian and English Dictionary* (Tahiti: London Missionary Society's Press, 1851), 194.
- 21 EN Ferdon, *Early Tonga: As the Explorers saw It 1616 – 1810* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987), 173-174.
- 22 P Buck, *Arts and Crafts of Hawaii*, Bulletin 45 (Honolulu: Bernice P. Bishop Museum, 1957), 375-376.
- 23 C Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States' Exploring Expedition during the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842*, (Papakura: R. McMillan, n.d), 110.
- 24 R Linton, *The Material Culture of the Marquesas Islands*, Publication 5 (Honolulu: Bernice P Bishop Museum, 1923), 388.
- 25 E Dieffenbach, *Travels in New Zealand; with contributions to the Geography, Geology, Botany, and Natural History of that Country* (London: John Murray, 1843; reprint, Christchurch: Capper Press, 1974), 56.
- 26 JH Beattie, *Traditional Lifeways of the Southern Māori: Otago University Museum Ethnological Project, 1920*. Edited by Atholl Anderson. (Dunedin: University of Otago Press in association with the Otago Museum, 1994).
- 27 Murihiku encompasses the southern regions of the South Island until the Waitaki River, Canterbury (East Coast of the South Island), Nelson (Northern part of the South Island) and Westland (West Coast of the South Island).
- 28 Beattie, *Traditional Lifeways of the Southern Māori*, 254.
- 29 Ibid., 484.
- 30 J Evans, *Discovery of Aotearoa* (Auckland: Reed, 1998), 25.
- 31 R Harlow, "Regional Variation in Maori," *New Zealand Journal of Archaeology* 1 (1979): 135.
- 32 E Tregear, *The Maori-Polynesian Comparative Dictionary* (Christchurch: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1891), xiv.